NATION

Muslims move HC against pooja order in Gyanvapi Mosque

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BUSINESS

Markets turn choppy on Budget day; Sensex, Nifty settle lower

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SPORTS

Hurt India eye sweeping changes in approach in 2nd Test

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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NIMMY'S BUDGET TRIES TO WOO RYOTS, WOMEN

Ahead of LS polls, the interim budget saw no major policy

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced an Rs 11.11 lakh crore spending on infrastructure. She vowed to continue reforms as she resisted resorting to populist measures in Modi government's last Budget before general elections.

Her interim budget for fiscal year beginning April 2024 followed the convention to remain a vote on account with no major policy announcement, and no changes in income tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as import duty. However, it offered amnesty for disputed income tax demands of the period prior to 2014-15 as a relief to small taxpayers.

In her close to an hour-long Budget speech in the Lok Sabha, she listed her government's achievements across sectors in the last 10 years and announced measures to boost tourism, housing and renewable energy. There is a renewed focus on agriculture/rural economy to course correct to some extent the skewed outcome of the ongoing economic growth even though there was no increase in the amount transferred to farmers under the PM Kisan scheme. The interim Budget seeks Parliament's authorisation for spending for four months and the full Budget for the fiscal year starting April will be presented in July by the government elected in April-May general elections.

Nirmala Sitharaman outside the Finance Ministry ahead of Interim Budget 2024, in New Delhi on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Sitharaman's Budget proposes to cut food, fertiliser and fuel subsidies by 8 per cent in 2024-25 over last year while keeping the allocation for rural employment scheme MGNREGA unchanged.

She announced enhancement to aquaculture productivity to 5 tonnes per hectare from existing 3 tonnes per hectare, and formulation of a strategy to achieve self-sufficiency in oil seeds production.

Spending on infrastructure such as roads, ports and airports has been raised by 11 per cent to Rs 11.1 lakh crore in a bid to sustain the current world-record beating economic growth and create more jobs. The Union government will also provide Rs 1.3 lakh crore long term loans to states to spend on infrastructure. It will develop tourist centres and market them at a global scale as also provide viability gap funding for harnessing wind energy potential for an initial capacity of 1 gigawatt. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 3 and 7

White Paper on pre-2014 economy soon

New Delhi, 1 Feb

The government is likely to present a White Paper on the mismanagement of the economy prior to 2014 with an aim to draw lessons. "The government will lay a White Paper on table of the House," announced Finance Minister Nirmala Sithraman while presenting the interim Budget for the next financial year on Thursday. According to a senior government official, the white paper may be presented next week. The Budget session of Parliament which began on Wednesday is scheduled to be the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha before the General Elections in the next couple of months. *—PTI*

At 56 mins, Sitharaman gave her shortest budget speech

BUDGET AT A GLANCE

FY25 Fiscal deficit is 5.1% of GDP

FY24 Fiscal deficit is 5.8% of GDP

Nominal GDP growth: 10.5%

₹50,000cr Divestment target

Capex: ₹11.1 lakh crore

KEY ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Aim to make India 'Viksit' (developed) by 2047
- The government will raise ₹14.13 lakh crore from the market by issuing dated securities in 2024-25
- No changes in taxation, both direct and indirect
- 2 crore houses will be built in 5 years
- Through roof-top solarisation, 1 crore households will get 300 units of free electricity every month
- New scheme to help people buy or build houses
- Ayushman Bharat scheme will extend healthcare cover to ASHA and anganwadi workers
- Increased vaccination for 9 to 14 year old girls for cervical cancer prevention
- New scheme to boost milk production and dairy farming
- 5 integrated aquaparks to be built at the cost of ₹1 lakh crore
- 40,000 rail bogies will be converted to Vande Bharat standards
- New schemes to cut greenhouse gas emission to zero by 2070
- Focus on improving tourist infrastructure in Lakshadweep
- For tech-savy youth, a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore will be established with 50-year interest free loan
- Propose to extend tax exemptions for IFSC to 31 March, 2025
- Disputed, old direct tax demand up to ₹25,000 cr to be scrapped
- Metro rail, Nano Bharat will be expanded to more cities
- 3 railway corridors--connectivity corridor, energy, mineral and cement corridor, and high traffic density corridor-- will be built
- PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana outlay at ₹2.05 lakh crore
- Centre reduces Budget grant to UGC by over 60%
- Personnel Ministry gets 310 crore for the training of government employees
- A new department—Matsya Sampada—to be set up for addressing needs of fishermen
- Tax returns will now be processed in 10 instead of 93 days and refunds will be done faster

ALLOCATION FOR MINISTRIES

₹6.1 Lcr Defence
₹2.78 Lcr Road transport and highway
₹2.55 Lcr Railways
₹2.13 Lcr Consumer Affair and Food
₹2.03 Lcr Home Affairs
₹1.77 Lcr Rural Development
₹1.68 Lcr Chemical and Fertilisers
₹1.37 Lcr Communications
₹1.27 Lcr Agriculter and Farmer Welfare

B'luru to get ₹263 cr elevated rotary flyover

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

Elevated rotary flyover, overbridge at Byappanahalli Cabinet also gave assent to construct an elevated 15.km-long rotary flyover at IOC Junction and an additional two-lane railway overbridge at Byappanahalli railway level crossing in Bengaluru. The projects are estimated to cost Rs 236 crore.

The cabinet also gave the go-ahead for the white-topping of roads in Bengaluru city, which is likely to cost Rs 1,200 crore. Administrative approval was also given to Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board to provide drinking water to 110 villages that were not getting piped water supply. These villages were added to the limits of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike as far back as 2006. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

The cabinet also gave the go-ahead for the white-topping of roads in Bengaluru **PHOTO: PTI**

Soren refused to receive arrest order, claims ED

RANCHI/NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

JMM leader Hemant Soren was informed about his arrest at about 5 pm last evening but he was "reluctant" to receive the order as he first wanted to submit his resignation from the chief minister's post, Enforcement Directorate claimed on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Supreme Court agreed to hear on Friday a plea of Soren challenging his arrest by ED.

However, ED alleged that a dozen land parcels in Ranchi measuring about 8.5 acres in total are in "illegal possession, occupation and use" of the JMM leader and are proceeds of crime under the anti-money laundering law.

The agency said in its arrest order that Soren was allowed to inform his wife about his arrest. The court on Thursday sent Soren to judicial custody for a day. ED had sought 10-day custody. ED alleged, in the remand note accessed by PTI that Soren left for the Governor House (Raj Bhavan) without consent and without completing the ongoing proceedings. "The written grounds of arrest could be served to him at 10 pm," ED told the court.

"Several summonses were issued to Soren for seeking his explanation in illegal acquisition of land matter, but most of the time he did not appear," ED claimed.

Soren also accused ED of arresting him as part of a "well-orchestrated conspiracy" by the Centre ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Soren has urged it to declare his arrest as unwarranted, arbitrary, and in violation of his fundamental rights. The petition, which will be heard on Friday, seeks his immediate release.

He said he had moved a plea before the top court on 31 January. He said his lawyers mentioned his petition before the vacation deputy registrar for urgent listing and were told a prayer can be made before the court of Chief Justice DY Chandrachud on Thursday at 10.30 am. Protesting against the arrest of Soren, several tribal outfits gave a call for Jharkhand bandh today. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

Hemant Soren **PHOTO: PTI**

- Supreme Court agreed to hear on Friday a plea of Soren challenging his arrest by ED.

LPG gas rate hiked by ₹12 in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

Oil-marketing companies (OMC) increased the price of commercial LPG Cylinders by Rs 12 on Thursday.

The commercial gas prices in Bengaluru have witnessed an increase, with the 19 kg cylinder seeing a hike of Rs 12. The previous rate for the 19 Kg commercial cylinder was Rs 1,839, and it has now risen to Rs 1,851. Additionally, the prices of the 47.5 kg commercial cylinders have increased by Rs 31, going from Rs 4,621 to the current price of Rs 4,625. Meanwhile the Small eateries and hotel owners denied to increase the prices of the food items but in the coming days depending on the price change in the commercial gas cylinders the hotel owners in the city might increase the price of eateries in the city. *—Salar News*

- The 19 kg cylinder saw a hike of Rs 12.

Additionally, the prices of the 47.5 kg commercial cylinders have increased by Rs 31 **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Census unlikely in 2024 too as only ₹1,277cr allocated

New Delhi, 1 Feb

The interim budget 2024-24 on Thursday allocated Rs 1,277.80 crore for census, a significant reduction from 2021-22 when Rs 3,768 crore was allocated and an indication that the exercise may not be carried out even after three years of delay. The census operation continues to be on hold and the government has not yet announced the new schedule. Officials said since general elections are due this year, the census is unlikely to be carried out in 2024. According to the interim budget, Rs 1,277.80 crore has been allocated for census surveys and statistics (Rs 520.96 in 2023-24). *—PTI*

US approves sale of 31 armed drones to India

WASHINGTON, 1 FEB

The US on Thursday approved the sale of 31 MQ-9B armed drones to India at an estimated cost of USD 3.99 billion, an American defence agency announced here.The proposed mega drone deal was announced during the historic State Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi here in June 2023.The Agency said it has delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale on Thursday. *—PTI*

India calls for cessation of violence in Myanmar

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

As Myanmar marked three years of a military coup that evicted Aung San Suu Kyi from power, India on Thursday called for complete cessation of violence in the country and its transition towards inclusive federal democracy. As a neighbouring country and friend of Myanmar, India has long been advocating for complete cessation of violence and Myanmar's transition towards inclusive federal democracy,"India said. India wants an early resolution of the situation through "constructive dialogue". *—PTI*

EU gives €50B to Ukraine amid Hungary's veto threat

BRUSSELS, 1 FEB

The leaders of the 27 European Union countries sealed a deal on Thursday to provide Ukraine with a new 50-billion-euro support package despite Hungary's weeks of threats to veto the move.

European Council President Charles Michel announced the agreement about only an hour into the leaders' summit in Brussels. "It was not immediately clear if any concessions were made to secure Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's approval. He raised staunch objections to the financial aid package in December and in the days leading up to Thursday's summit in Brussels.

On their way into their meeting, several fellow leaders had lashed out at Orban, accusing him of blackmail and playing political games that undermined support for Ukraine and the country's war-ravaged economy.

Almost two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war has ground to a halt and Ukraine's economy desperately needs propping up.

But political infighting in the EU and in the United States has held up a long-term source of funding. *—AP*

Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico, talks to Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban at EU summit on Thursday **PHOTO: AP**

PRICEY LUNCH

Fish Names	Rate on 8 January 2024	Present Rate (1 February)
Catla	₹160/kg	₹180/kg
Sankar	₹240/kg	₹300/kg
Silverfish	₹240/Kg	₹300/kg
Mackerel Fish	₹200/kg	₹300/Kg
Black pomfret	₹550/Kg	₹700/Kg
White pomfret	₹950/ Kg	₹1,200/Kg
Siyar Fish	₹700/kg	₹900/Kg
Blue Crab	₹500/Kg	₹650/kg
Red Crab	₹300/kg	₹400/kg
Rohu Fish	₹140/Kg	₹180/Kg
Sardine Fish	₹150/Kg	₹250/Kg
Small Octopus	₹700/kg	₹850/kg
Butter Fish	₹300/kg	₹500/Kg
Kelah Fish	₹500/kg	₹80/ Kg

SUPPLY DIPS BY 50%

Fish prices in City soar due to poor catch at coasts

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Fish prices in Bengaluru City have surged due to the shortage of fish coming from Dakshina Kannada district and Chennai in Tamil Nadu.

Many fishing boats going to deep sea off Dakshina Kannada are returning empty-handed and consequently, many are now docked at the harbour. On average, more than 10 tonnes of fish from Dakshina Kannada coast are transported to the City every day and now it has come down by around 50%.

There are multiple reasons behind the decline, Mangaluru Deputy Director of Fisheries Yedthady Dilip Kumar told Salar News. "Firstly, due to the El Nino effect the coastal temperature has been rising, leading to warmer water. Fish typically thrive in cooler water, so when the water becomes warm, they migrate to different areas. So, the fish catch from Dakshina Kannada district have migrated to elsewhere," Kumar said.

The other reason is the negligible catch during the lockdown period due to Covid-19. "During the lockdown, fish catching was negligible. When the Covid-19 period ended, there was a sudden increase in fish catches and there was an overexploitation of marine wealth," he said.

The third reason is illegal fishing at night and this might have affected the supply to Bengaluru. "We have informed the police officials about this, but they have not taken any action," Kumar said.

Many fishing boats going to deep sea off Dakshina Kannada are returning empty-handed **PHOTO: SALAR**

Fish retailer Faiyaz Khan from Shivaji Nagar told Salar News the reduction in the supply has affected his business. In Mangaluru, around 80-90 per cent of boats are anchored, and in Udupi, around 50 per cent are lying idle. Currently, only a handful of deep-sea trawl boats are venturing out in search of fish, but even their catch is low, according to V Dayanand a retail fish seller in the City.

V Balaji, a boat owner from Chennai, told Salar News that they are forced to venture out to far-off areas in search of catch. "There is no catch available near the Chennai coastline or even Rameshwaram. Our fishermen are venturing up to Andaman Islands and even to the Myanmar border in search of a big catch. The fishermen are burdened as they have to use a large amount of diesel and ice blocks on their long journey." The reduction in marine wealth is also a reason for the decline in production. *—Salar News*

Auto drivers fined for refusing to accept rides

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

City Traffic Police carried out a special drive on auto drivers refusing to take rides and those who were demanding extra money from passengers in Bengaluru on Wednesday night. A total of 1,226 cases have been filed and Rs 6.35 lakh in fines were collected.A total of 177 auto drivers in South Bengaluru were booked for unauthorised licences or invalid insurance, a statement by the traffic police said. The police also fined people violating rules around schools and colleges from 26 to 31 January. The police collected Rs 16.19 lakh in fines and registered up to 2,000 cases. The highest number of violations was for triple riding with 375 cases registered. A total of 375 cases were registered for breaking no-entry and one-way rules. A total of 1,466 cases related to riding on the footpaths were registered and a fine of Rs 7.22 lakh has been collected. As many as 48 cases against faulty number plates have also been registered.

—Salar News

Smuggled gold worth ₹11 lakh seized at MIA

MANGALURU, 1 FEB

Customs officials at Mangaluru International Airport (MIA) detected gold that was being smuggled by a passenger who arrived from Dubai.Acting on a tip-off that a man of Kasaragod origin was smuggling gold on Air India Express flight that arrived from Dubai, the officials subjected him to checking and found 179 gm in paste form valued at Rs 11.16 lakh, a Customs statement here said on Thursday. The gold in paste form was hidden in bed sheets, pillow covers and Horlicks bottle.

—PTI

17 Feb final date to install HSRP: Transport dept

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

Karnataka State Transport Department has set a final deadline of 17 February 2024 for the installation of High-Security Registration Plates (HSRP) on vehicles in State. After this date, vehicles without the updated number plates will face fines, with a penalty of Rs 1,000 for the first offence and Rs 2,000 for subsequent violations.10 lakh out of an estimated 2.15 crore vehicles have been fitted with HSRP, according to the Transport Department. Many motorists have taken to social media and HSRP customer care website to air their problems regarding the HSRP number plate yet there was no response to resolve their grievances. Motorists are waiting for their number plates to be delivered even after completing the required process. Motorists were unable to place the order, while some were getting number plates with the wrong vehicle numbers.

—Salar News

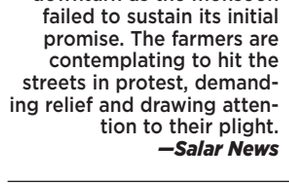


PHOTO: SALAR

Farmers sell off their cattle to repay loan

HAVERI, 1 FEB

Farmers in Haveri district who are in dire straits due to erratic monsoon are selling their cattle, including oxen, at almost half the price to settle their debts. The timing, however, has created a double-edged problem, as prospective buyers also find themselves short on funds, resulting in a scarcity of buyers in the market. Some of the drought-hit farmers are even selling their houses and lands to repay loans. North Karnataka, which witnessed varied crops like maize, rice, soybean, groundnut, and cotton during the initial stages of sowing, faced a sudden downturn as the monsoon failed to sustain its initial promise. The farmers are contemplating to hit the streets in protest, demanding relief and drawing attention to their plight.

—Salar News

Govt approves online marriage registration

People can use Aadhaar cards to get marriage registered

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

Karnataka Cabinet on Thursday approved some amendments to Hindu Marriage Act to simplify the process of marriage registration by allowing online applications at Bapuji, Gram One and other centres in the State.

"People can now register their marriages online at Kaveri 2 portal of the government," said Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil here on Thursday. To register the marriage online, the candidates will have to provide Aadhaar authentication. However, if one wishes to not provide their Aadhaar details, they can register offline. In Karnataka, only about 30 per cent of the marriages are registered. Meanwhile, the new amendment does not apply to people preferring to register marriages under Special Marriage Act. They have to notify the sub-registrar one month ahead of the wedding date, and the groom and bride should be present in person.

The new amendment does not apply to people preferring to register marriages under Special Marriage Act *PHOTO: PTI*

Other Cabinet decisions

The Cabinet also approved Rs 208.45 crore to Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board for the 110 villages which were added to the jurisdiction of Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) in 2006.

A total of Rs 1,200 crore was also sanctioned to BBMP for infrastructure works.The Cabinet also waived off the interest on loans (totalling Rs 440.20 crore) taken by farmers in cooperative banks. Under Urban Infrastructure Development Funds, 34 new gas crematoriums have been approved at a cost of Rs 136 crore.

The Cabinet also approved the construction works on the premises of KC General Hospital at a total cost of Rs 150 crore. It has also decided to provide a two per cent reservation for sportspeople in civil services.

New projects under Medical Education

The Cabinet gave the nod for several projects under Medical Education Department, including Human Genome Institute at Raichur University at a cost of Rs 47.32 crore by Kalyana Karnataka Region Development Board.A total of Rs 810 crore was allotted for Chikkaballapur Nandi Medical Science Institute, Rs 416 crore for Yadgir Medical Science Institute and Rs 455 crore for Chikkamagaluru Medical Science Institutes. A 300-bed hospital will be built for Rs 126.90 crore on Gulbarga Medical Science Institute campus.A hospital in Hassan with a capacity of 450 beds at a cost of Rs 1.42 crore will also be set up. A revised estimate of Rs 499 crore was approved for completing the works on the premises of Haveri Institute of Medical Sciences.

Northern Karnataka Infrastructure Projects

The Cabinet also greenlighted the filling up of 20 tanks in Uchagaon and Santibastavad Hoblis in Belagavi district at a cost of Rs 287.55 crore. Similarly, 61 lakes in Hirebagewadi in Belagavi District are to be augmented at an estimated cost of Rs 519.10 crore.

—Salar News

FOR MINIMUM WAGE

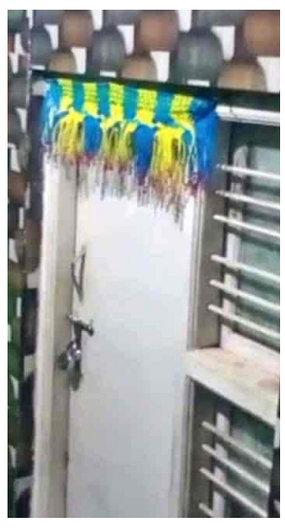
Members of All India Trade Union Congress protest demanding minimum wages of Rs 31,500 for unorganised sector at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Thursday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

WIFE KEPT IN HOUSE ARREST FOR 12 YEARS

MYSURU, 1 FEB

A man allegedly put his wife under house arrest for 12 years suspecting infidelity at Matakere village of HD Kote taluk in Mysuru district. The victim is the third wife of Sannalaiah and they have two children. The first two wives left him due to harassment. Sannalaiah kept his third wife under house arrest with windows permanently closed and the main door closed with three locks. Sannalaiah didn't allow anyone to interact with his wife and threatened her with harm if she disclosed her situation to anyone. Village elders held multiple meetings and advised Sannalaiah to release her, but he didn't budge. Upon learning about the woman's flight, a team of lawyer Siddappaji, Jayasheela from Santhvan Kendra and officials broke the locks and rescued the victim and her children. Women and Children Welfare Department provided shelter to the woman at Santwana Kendra.

—Salar News



INTERIM BUDGET

'Injustice to South may call for a separate nation'

This is the most disappointing budget. State is not getting any new projects in poor and anti-Dalit budget

-Siddaramiah, Chief Minister

Union budget is worst I have seen. State has got a raw deal and the budget has done injustice to the state

-DK Shivakumar, Deputy Chief Minister

The Union government has made good decision by tax exemption for those with an income of up to Rs 7 lakh that will benefit crores of middle families, benefiting about 9 crore women under the self-help scheme, free Ayushman insurance for lakhs of ASHA workers

-R Ashoka, Leader of Opposition

The budget reaffirms the commitment towards building a strong, empowered, developed and a "Vishwaguru" India in the coming days

- Yediyurappa, Former Chief Minister

NEW DELHI/ BENGALURU, 1 FEB

Claiming taxes collected from the south were being distributed to north India and that the former were not getting their due share, Congress MP DK Suresh on Thursday said the southern states will be forced to demand for a separate nation if the 'injustice' was not rectified.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said Suresh only spoke about the public perception, even as BJP lashed out at the Lok Sabha member.

Suresh said in New Delhi that it will be enough if the Centre gave Karnataka its share of money. "Our demand is that we must get our share of GST, Customs from our State and direct taxes."

The Centre has not allotted funds to State under 15th Finance Commission for the Upper Bhadra Project, Peripheral Ring Road project, irrigation needs and drought relief, among others, the MP said. Suresh said: "The Centre is collecting taxes to the tune of more than Rs 4 lakh crore from Karnataka but how much we are getting in return? We must question this. Since the 16th Finance Commission is going to start, if these (the anomalies) are not rectified then the southern states will have to raise their voice."Alleging that Hindi was being imposed on South India in every aspect, he said the ordinance mandating 60 per cent use of Kannada in signboards of businesses and establishments was 'rejected' by Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot.

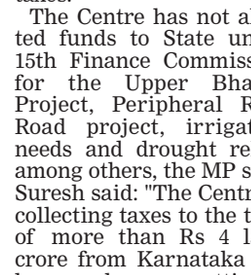
Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said one can make demands and put pressure on the Centre because India is a federal state. "We have agreed to federalism. Further, the State governments give taxes. Centre does not have its area to extract taxes. The tax money that goes from here is distributed to us by the Finance Commission. Now injustice has happened to us in tax distribution. Devolution of taxes is not happening properly.

There was 1.07 per cent decrease in devolution of taxes from 14th finance commission to 15th finance commission. It happened during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure," he said.Opposition BJP condemned Suresh's statement saying this was "Bharat Todo movement". Party's State President BY Vijayendra strongly condemned Suresh' statement. "People in responsible position should weigh well before speaking."

—PTI

DK Suresh *PHOTO: X/ DK SURESH*

- DKS said Suresh only spoke about the public perception, even as BJP lashed out at the Lok Sabha member Suresh said in New Delhi that it will be enough if the Centre gave Karnataka its share of money. "Our demand is that we must get our share of GST, Customs from our State and direct taxes."



I am delighted that the budget has a provision to make India self-sufficient in producing different oil seeds. This will benefit farmers across the country

-HD Kumaraswamy, Former Chief Minister

Beer prices up in State again, 3rd time in less than 7 months

BELAGAVI, 1 FEB

Police on Thursday facili For the third time in less than seven months, the government has increased prices of beer. This comes just 15 days before the State budget. The State Excise Department ordered the hike on Thursday.

The price of a bottle of beer will be up by Rs 5.

The State government increased the additional excise duty on beer from 185 per cent to 195 per cent

Speaking about the hike the Joint Director of the Excise Department, KS Shivayya said, "The increase is to increase the government exchequer. We had given the proposal to increase by 20 per cent. Last time they increased 10 per cent and this time 10 per cent.

PHOTO: PIXABAY

We are trying to match the prices with Indian Made Liquor."

G Raju, a guzzler, said, "The prices are increasing again and again, if this continues, we will not vote for Congress next time."

Another buyer, referring to the Shakti scheme said, "Why should I pay for some woman to travel freely?There should be a cap or regulations on increasing the price. Congress is looting the drinkers."

The beer sale is expected to go up generally in summer and hence the government has decided to increase beer prices.

—Salar News

SC reserves verdict on AMU's minority status

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Grappling with the intractable issue of Aligarh Muslim University's minority status, the Supreme Court said on Thursday the 1981 amendment to the AMU Act, which effectively accorded it a minority status, only did a "half-hearted job" and not restore to the institution the position it had prior to 1951.

While the AMU Act, 1920 speaks about incorporating a teaching and residential Muslim university in Aligarh, the 1951 amendment does away with compulsory religious instructions for Muslim students at the university.

A seven-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud reserved its verdict on the vexed question that has repeatedly tested Parliament's legislative acumen and judiciary's prowess in interpreting complex laws involving the institution that was founded in 1875 as Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College by prominent Muslim community members led by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.Several top lawyers appeared before the bench to argue for the rival sides.

—PTI

PHOTO: WIKI COMMONS

Catholic bishops address Manipur issue in City

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

The second day of the General Body Meeting of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) here on Thursday witnessed deliberations on critical issues, including the fruits of the synod on synodality, Manipur and its present status, and the situation of Christians in India.Reverend Linus Neli, Archbishop of Imphal, spoke on Manipur and its present status. He expressed immense gratitude for the humanitarian assistance provided by bishops and NGOs to the people of Manipur. He highlighted the demographic, and ethnic aspects, shedding light on the relief and rehabilitation efforts by the Catholic Church.

—Salar News

NIA CRACKS DOWN

City IS sympathiser gets 10 years for terrorism

BENGALURU, 1 FEB

A special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court in the City has sentenced an Islamic State sympathiser to 10 years in prison on charges of terrorism and waging war against an Asiatic ally by a special court in Bengaluru on Wednesday.

The accused Mehdi Masroor Biswas who was an Islamic State sympathiser and a native of West Bengal who was living in the City. He was picked up by a special team of the Central Crime Branch (CCB) of the City police from his apartment in Gangondanahalli.

The accused was allegedly operating the ₹highly influential' Shami Witness X account from here in the city and was corresponding with his handlers in the Islamic State. He told interrogators that he wanted to join ISIL but had responsibilities here and could not go.

Biswas allegedly spent long periods every day tweeting IS propaganda messages, posting near real-time updates on the progress made by IS fighters in Iraq and Syria by tracking news sites, cheering IS victories and hailing slain IS fighters as martyrs.

According to the special court order, Biswas was "sentenced to undergo simple imprisonment for a period of ten years and liable to pay a fine of Rs 50,000 for the offence punishable under Section 18B of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967," for recruiting people for terrorist acts. In default of payment of the fine, he will undergo simple imprisonment for one year.Similarly, Biswas has been sentenced to 10 years in jail with a fine of Rs 50,000 on charges of supporting a terrorist organisation (section 39 of the UAPA) and for waging war against an Asiatic ally of India (section 125 of the Indian Penal Code).He has been sentenced to seven years in prison with a fine of Rs 25,000 for taking part in unlawful activities (section 13 of the UAPA) and three years in prison with a fine of Rs 10,000 under IPC sections 153A (promoting enmity between communities) and 505 (1) and (2) for public mischief.The "substantial sentences in respect of all the above offences shall run concurrently" and "the period of detention undergone by the accused in judicial custody shall be set off against the term of imprisonment imposed on him as provided under section 428 of CrPC", the court ruled. The fine recovered from Biswas will be used to cover the expenses incurred by the prosecution.

—Salar News

The accused was allegedly operating the `highly influential' Shami Witness X account from City *PHOTO: X*

Nude parade case: Police gets eloped couple married

BELAGAVI, 1 FEB

Police on Thursday facilitated the marriage of the eloped couple, Dundappa Ashoka Nayak and Priyanka Basappa Nayak, at the Belagavi south sub-registrar's office after tracking their couple.

On 10 December, a 42-year-old woman was stripped naked, beaten up and dragged to an electric pole as her son eloped with a girl from the village. Despite both families belonging to the same tribal community, the girl's family opposed the relationship due to economic differences, labelling the boy's family as economically weaker and his father as an 'outsider.'High Court strongly criticized police for their failure to prevent the attack and passed the order for action against those who stood by as silent spectators.

The court also suggested imposing fines on villagers present during the incident, with the collected As compensation for the victim.All 13 accused, including a minor, have been arrested, and the case is under investigation by the Special Wing Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The State government has awarded 2 acres of land to the victim, and the CID is preparing a 1,500-page charge sheet for the court.

—Salar News

UNION INTERIM BUDGET-2024

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

Oppn leaders dub interim budget as poll gimmick

Congress said the fastest-growing economy is not a badge of honour

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with Ministers of State Bhagwat Kishanrao Karad and other officials poses for photos ahead of presentation of Interim Budget, in New Delhi on Thursday ***PHOTO: PTI***

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Several Opposition leaders slammed the BJP-led Centre on Thursday for allegedly offering nothing to people in the interim budget and said it was more of an "election gimmick" to woo people, even though it has failed to honour the promises made to them on employment, price rise and farmers' income.

Congress said the interim budget lacks accountability and vision. The party alleged that the ruling NDA's approach to the economy and governance is biased in favour of the rich and the interim budget neither talks about the promised 2 crore jobs every year nor about taming inflation or doubling farmers' income.

"It is a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich," former finance minister P Chidambaram alleged. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge said, "We ask the (Narendra) Modi government, how many of the promises made by the government in the last 10 years have been fulfilled." He said only big dreams have been shown to people, schemes re-launched by changing names, but what happened to the old promises has not been told. "How will the new dreams being shown get fulfilled?" Kharge asked.

"Both accountability and vision are missing from this interim budget. We expected some new schemes to ease the sufferings of the poor and middle class from this Interim Budget 2024," Congress chief said. Chidambaram told a press conference that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke about the GDP but did not address per capita income. She barely referred to inflation and failed to mention that food inflation is currently at 7.7 per cent, he said.

He said in the last three days, there has been a "tiresome repetition of boastful claims" by the government on how India has surged forward in the last five to 10 years. *—PTI*

Interim budget to build up developed India, says Modi

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said the interim Budget presented by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman offers the "guarantee" of strengthening the foundation of a developed India and carries the "confidence of continuity".

In a televised address following the budget, he said it will empower the four pillars of developed India -- the young, poor, women and farmers.

"This is a budget of creating India's future," Modi said, adding that it reflects the young aspirations of a young India. While keeping the fiscal deficit under control, the Prime Minister noted that total expenditure has seen a historic increase to Rs 11,11,111 crore in this budget. He said it will create millions of new employment opportunities for India's youth along with the creation of modern infrastructure of the 21st century.

Citing the announcement of a Rs 1 lakh crore fund for research and innovation, the Prime Minister noted that the "historic" budget has also offered rebates for start-ups. It has provisions for a huge capital expenditure of Rs 11.11 lakh crore while keeping the fiscal deficit under control, he said.

The budget empowers the poor and middle class and will create countless employment opportunities for the youth, Modi said.

Modi said the government sets a big goal, achieves it, and then sets an even bigger target for itself. Highlighting the government's efforts for the welfare of the poor and the middle class, he referred to the construction of over four crore houses in villages and cities and increasing the target to build two crore more houses. *—PTI*

- Citing the announcement of a Rs 1 lakh crore fund for research and innovation, the Prime Minister noted that the "historic" budget has also offered rebates for start-ups

The budget has been formulated in a way that neglects Kerala's needs and interests. Demands such as protection of domestic rubber cultivation through increased import duties were disregarded

Pinarayi Vijayan, Kerala Chief Minister

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has presented an empty budget that has nothing to weigh upon. Has there been any announcement on the minimum support price, as sought by farmers? No, not the least

MK Stalin, TN Chief Minister

The budget is only giving 'gyan'. There is no action on the ground. There was not a word on funds to states in the budget speech. They are cheating federalism and committing financial terrorism with states

Derek O'Brien, TMC leader

The budget speech is short and disappointing, and this government has a talent for dressing up its failures as successes

Shashi Tharoor, Congress leader

NIMMY HAILS MODI GOVT'S 'ACHIEVEMENTS'

- Average real income of Indians has gone up by 50%
- The government has brought 25 crore people out of poverty in 10 years
- Female enrolment in higher edu up by 28%
- Direct benefit given to 11.8 crore farmers annually under PM Kisan scheme
- PM-SVANidhi assisted 78L street vendors
- Food worries eliminated through free rations for 80 crore people
- 'Direct Benefit Transfer' of ₹34 lakh crore using PM-Jan Dhan accounts saved ₹2.7 lakh crore for the poor
- Centre sanctioned 43 crore loans worth ₹22.5 lakh crore to entrepreneurs.
- Legalised 'Triple Talaq,' reserved one-third seats for women, and PM Awas Yojana empowered women
- 3 crore houses built under PMAY-G, 70% houses given to women in rural areas
- Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana benefited 38L farmers and generated 10L jobs.
- Success of self-help groups empowered 1crore women to become 'Lakhpati didis'
- Number of airports doubled to 149
- Over the last 10 years, direct tax collections more than tripled
- We are working to make India a developed country by 2047
- Tax base of GST more than doubled
- PM Awas Yojana spend in FY25 seen at ₹80,671 crore

Solar rooftop scheme to help save ₹18,000 per household

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday said Pradhanmantri Suryodaya Yojana will enable one crore families to get up to 300 units of free electricity every month and help them save up to Rs 18,000 annually.

"I have taken my first decision after returning from Ayodhya that our government will launch 'Pradhan Mantri Suryoday Yojna' with the aim to install rooftop solar systems in one crore houses," Modi had said on X.

Sitharaman in her interim Budget speech said through rooftop solarisation, one crore households will be enabled to obtain up to 300 units of free electricity each month. Talking about the benefits, she informed the House that there will be "savings up to Rs 15,000-18,000 annually for households from free solar electricity and selling the surplus to the distribution companies."

PHOTO: FREEPIK

The scheme will also aid charging of electric vehicles; entrepreneurship opportunities for a large number of vendors for supply and installation and employment opportunities for the youth with technical skills in manufacturing, installation, and maintenance.

Talking about India's commitment for 'net-zero' by 2070, she announced a viability gap funding for harnessing offshore wind energy. Similarly, the data showed that wind energy capacity in the country stood around 45 GW while large hydro is 47 GW. The biomass power/cogen capacity about 10 GW and that of small hydro (up to 25 MW) is around 5 GW, while the waste-to-energy capacity stood at 583 MW. *—PTI*

Kejriwal likely to skip ED summons again: Sources

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Delhi Chief Minister and AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal is unlikely to appear before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Friday for questioning in a money laundering case linked to the Delhi excise policy, sources in the party said. ED on Wednesday issued a fresh and the fifth summons to Kejriwal after he skipped four earlier summonses issued by the federal agency over the last four months. *—PTI*

US declares pact on Indo-Pacific supply chain

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

The US on Thursday announced that a key agreement on supply chain resilience under the Indo-Pacific economic framework involving 14 partner nations, including India, Japan and Australia, will come into force on 24 February. US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said the pact will facilitate a collaborative approach to strengthen supply chains and prevent potential disruptions. The US Department of Commerce said the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) agreement relating to supply chain resilience will enter into force on 24 February. "This is a critical step in bringing the landmark, first-of-its kind agreement into action and promoting coordination among the IPEF partners on building resilient, efficient, productive, sustainable, transparent, diversified, secure, fair, and inclusive supply chains," it said. *—PTI*

Not inviting Champai to form govt contempt of law: Cong

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

- Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge shared a video of Jharkhand MLAs of Congress and JMM and accused governors of hammering nails in the coffin of Indian democracy

Congress on Thursday questioned the delay in inviting Champai Soren to head the government in Jharkhand despite having the support of 48 MLAs and alleged that this amounts to contempt of the Constitution and denial of public mandate.

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge shared a video of Jharkhand MLAs of Congress and JMM and accused governors of hammering nails in the coffin of Indian democracy. "In the House of 81 MLAs, only 41 form a majority. Despite having the support of 48 MLAs, not inviting Champai to form the government is clearly contempt of the Constitution and denial of public mandate," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

"Nails are being hammered in the coffin of Indian democracy by His Excellencies," Kharge said pointing at the role of governors in states. Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said this is yet another example of political injustice "for which the Prime Minister and Home Minister duo are considered experts".

"By doing what is called 'Horse-Trading' in English, they are being given time only for that. This is not only injustice but also murder of democracy," Ramesh said in a post in Hindi on X. Party leader Abhishek Singhvi asked whether the Centre wants to impose President's Rule in Jharkhand.

Addressing a press conference, Singhvi and party leader Saptgiri Ulaka asked whether the governor was waiting for some instructions from the prime minister's and Union home minister's office. "The silence is eloquent," Singhvi said, pointing out that the numbers were clear that the ruling alliance has 47/48 members while the opposition has 32/33 members in the Jharkhand assembly.

"Does it require some rocket science to calculate the majority," he asked, wondering whether the BJP was trying to encourage defections by hook or crook. He said the BJP had set up a world renowned university which awards PhD and post doctorates in single theme of toppling elected governments, installing minority governments by defection and horse trading. *—PTI*

WITHDRAWAL DEMANDED

'Agnipath Yojana not in interest of army'

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Demanding the withdrawal of the Agnipath Scheme, Congress MP Deependra Singh Hooda on Thursday lashed out at the BJP-led Centre and said that this scheme is a mere political decision taken by the government, which neither serves the interests of the army nor the youth who want to join forces.

Addressing reporters in Delhi, Hooda said, "The Government of India should withdraw the Agnipath Yojana. This scheme is neither in the interest of the country's army nor in the interest of the country nor in the interest of the youth of the country.

Deependra Singh Hooda ***PHOTO: PTI***

From where did the demand for bringing this scheme to the country arise? Why was this political decision taken? This is the same Indian Army that, in its glorious history, worked to break Pakistan into two parts in 1971."

Deependra Singh Hooda took part in the protests held by Congress against the Agnipath Yojana. Agnipath Yojana is a recruitment scheme for Indian youth to serve in the Armed Forces. The scheme is called AGNIPATH and the youth selected under this scheme will be known as Agniveers.

Under the AGNIPATH scheme, the Agniveers will be enrolled in the Forces under respective Service Acts for a period of four years. *—ANI*

JMM-LED COALITION SEEKS TO FORM GOVT

RANCHI, 1 FEB

Amid a political crisis in Jharkhand, JMM legislative party leader Champai Soren on Wednesday called on Governor CP Radhakrishnan and urged him to accept his claim to form the government at the earliest. He said that the Governor assured a delegation of the JMM-led alliance that he would soon decide on the matter. "We requested the governor to take a decision at the earliest as it is over 20 hours without any government in Jharkhand," said Champai after meeting the governor at Raj Bhavan. Champai became the new leader of the JMM legislative party after Hemant Soren resigned on Wednesday night as the chief minister after a marathon interrogation by the ED in a money laundering case, and his subsequent arrest. *—PTI*

NCP MLA Rohit Pawar appears before ED

MUMBAI, 1 FEB

NCP MLA Rohit Pawar, the grand-nephew of party supremo Sharad Pawar, appeared before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday in connection with a money laundering probe into the alleged Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank scam, an official said.

This is the second time that Rohit appeared before the ED in the last 10 days. The 38-year-old MLA from Karjat-Jamkhed was earlier questioned by the agency on 24 January. He reached the ED's office situated at Ballard Estate in South Mumbai at 1.05 pm.

His family members accompanied him till the agency's office. Sharad's wife Pratibha Pawar was present at the NCP office located nearby, as the legislator appeared before the ED.

Sharad and his daughter Supriya Sule are currently in New Delhi for Parliament session. Hundreds of NCP workers, who had come from across the state, gathered at the NCP office here as well as near the ED's establishment and staged an agitation against the agency's summons to Rohit.

A large number of police personnel were deployed near the ED office and barricades were placed on roads leading to it. ED conducted searches on 5 January on the Baramati Agro, a company owned by Rohit, and some linked entities on in Baramati, Pune, Aurangabad and other locations. *—PTI*

Rohit Pawar ***PHOTO: PTI***

- His family members accompanied him till the agency's office. Sharad's wife Pratibha Pawar was present at the NCP office located nearby, as the legislator appeared before ED

CHANDIGARH MAYORAL POLLS

AAP councillor moves SC against HC order

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

A councillor of the AAP has moved the Supreme Court challenging a Punjab and Haryana High Court order that has refused to grant any interim relief to the party seeking fresh mayoral polls in Chandigarh.

A division bench of Justices Sudhir Singh and Harsh Bunger of the High Court denied interim relief on Wednesday to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which had alleged tampering with ballot papers and sought fresh polls under the supervision of a retired judge of the court.

The High Court issued a notice on the plea to the Chandigarh administration and sought its response within three weeks.

AAP councillor Kuldeep Kumar, who was the candidate for the mayor's post, has filed the appeal in the top court against the denial of interim relief and listing of the plea after three weeks. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept the Chandigarh mayoral polls, retaining all three posts, in a setback to the Congress-AAP alliance that has alleged tampering with ballot papers by the presiding officer.

Haryana HC ***PHOTO: PTI***

The High Court issued notices to the Chandigarh administration, the municipal corporation, presiding officer Anil Masih and newly-elected mayor Manoj Sonkar, among others, asking then to file their replies within three weeks. The matter was adjourned till February 26 in the high court.

According to the plea filed in the high court, the AAP candidate has sought directions for holding fresh polls in a free and fair manner under the supervision of a retired judge to ensure "no malpractice".

The plea says it was filed as the "election was not held in a free and fair manner and there was a gross violation while counting of votes, with tampering of the ballot papers and declaring them invalid, in the favour of BJP and against the alliance of AAP and Congress". *—PTI*

200 cars stranded after landslide near J&K highway

BANIHAL/JAMMU, 1 FEB

The Jammu-Srinagar national highway was closed for traffic on Thursday due to a landslip in Ramban district, leaving over 200 vehicles stranded. The highway also witnessed fresh snowfall at several places.The landslip took place in Sherbibi area of the district, which also witnessed heavy rains, officials said.Over 200 vehicles are stranded at different points of the 270-km highway, the only all-weather road linking Kashmir with the rest of the country. They said work is on to reopen the highway for traffic but incessant rains in the Ramban-Banihal sector were proving to be an impediment. The traffic police advised people to avoid journey on the highway till the weather improves. —*PTI*

ISIS operative seeks bail to be with wife during child birth

MUMBAI, 1 FEB

An accused in an ISIS module bust case has sought interim bail from a court here to be with his wife at the time of their child's birth.ZubairShaikh, one of the six accused arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) last year for allegedly promoting terror activities in India at the behest of terror outfit ISIS, said his wife was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, and will require to undergo the cesarean delivery on February 4.The plea on Wednesday said Shaikh should be given temporary bail so that he could be with her.The NIA opposed his plea, saying the grounds raised were not "cogent and valid". The court is likely to pass an order on the plea on Friday. The case was registered by the NIA on 28 June, 2023, against TabishSiddiqui and others, following information received by the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding a conspiracy hatched by them to disturb the sovereignty of the country, and to wage a war against the Government of India. —*PTI*

Quake of 4 magnitude hits Kutch; no casualty

AHMEDABAD, 1 FEB

An earthquake of 4 magnitude hit Gujarat's Kutch district on Thursday morning but there was no report of any casualty or property damage, officials said. The earthquake was recorded at 8.06 am, said officials of the Institute of Seismological Research (ISR) in Gandhinagar.Its epicentre was 30 km east-north-east of Khavda town of Kutch district near the India-Pakistan border, at a depth of 15.2 km, they said. There was no report of any casualty or damage to property from any part in Kutch, district officials said. Kutch recorded a 4 magnitude tremor on 28 January also. The district is located in a "very high risk" seismic zone, and tremors of lower intensity are a regular occurrence. In 2001, a massive earthquake shook the Kutch district affecting several towns and villages, killing around 13,800 people and leaving 1.67 lakh injured. —*PTI*

AQI improves to 'moderate' in Delhi after rainfall

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Overnight rainfall and gusty winds not only brought a significant improvement in the air quality on Thursday but also ensured that Delhiites experienced pleasant weather conditions through the day. Delhi's air quality significantly improved to the 'Moderate' category with a reading of 177 following heavy rains that lashed the national capital. The AQI on Wednesday was recorded at 386 in the very poor category. Delhi's main weather station, Safdarjung, recorded 26.5 mm of precipitation between 8.30 am on Wednesday and 8.30 pm on Thursday. The national capital recorded 0.6 mm of rainfall between 8.30 am and 5.30 pm on Thursday. —*PTI*

Muslims move HC against pooja order in Gyanvapi Mosque

They moved HC within hours of SC refusing to hear their plea

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

The Gyanvapi mosque management committee moved Allahabad High Court on Thursday challenging a Varanasi court order that allowed Hindu prayers before idols in a cellar of the mosque.

Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee counsel SFA Naqvi said they have requested an urgent hearing in the matter.

They moved High Court within hours of the Supreme Court refusing to hear their plea

against the Varanasi district court's order and asking them to approach the High Court.

The Varanasi court had ruled on Wednesday that a priest can perform prayers before the idols in the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi Masjid.

The prayers will be conducted by a "pujari" nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust.

Shailendra Kumar Pathak, who had petitioned the Varanasi district court seeking the right to worship there, had claimed that his grandfather Somnath Vyas offered puja there up to December 1993 when it was stopped by the administration.

Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Gyanvapi Masjid committee to approach Allahabad High Court ***PHOTO: X***

Hindu side lawyer Madan Mohan Yadav has said that puja stopped there during the tenure of chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav after Babdi masjid was demolished on 6 December, 1992.

The court has directed the local administration to make arrangements within seven days for prayers in the cellar.

The order by judge AK Vishvesha came a day after an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) report on the mosque complex was made public.

The ASI survey, ordered by the same court, in a related case, suggested that the mosque was constructed during Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple.

In an earlier order on 17 January, the Varanasi court had directed that the district magistrate should take charge of the cellar. But it had not then given any directions on the right to offer prayers there.

—*PTI*

Hours after order, pooja performed in mosque

RAIPUR, 31 JAN

Prayers were performed inside a cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque here on Wednesday night following court orders, president of the KashiVishwanath temple trust NagendraPandey said.

Pandey told PTI that at around 10.30 pm on Wednesday, "Vyasji's cellar was opened after 31 years for prayers."

Asked if prayers were performed in the basement, he said, "Yes."

"It was necessary to follow the court's orders, so the district administration made all the arrangements with great promptness," Pandey added.

District Magistrate S Rajlingam said, "I have complied with the court's order."

Some locals claimed that after cleaning the cellar, an 'aarti' of Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Ganesh was performed.

Official sources in the district administration said at around 9.30 pm on

PHOTO: X

Wednesday, the members of the Kashi-Vishwanath Trust were called and the barricades before the Nandi statue facing the mosque's 'wazukhana' were removed.

The court had directed the local administration to make arrangements within seven days for prayers in the cellar. This will involve "proper arrangements" with metal barricades at the complex, it said.

Taking a swipe at the Yogi Adityanath government in the state, Samajwadi Party President AkhileshYadav said the haste displayed by the BJP in following the court orders is an attempt to prevent any legal recourse. —*PTI*

Decomposed body of missing youth found in Manipur

IMPHAL, 1 FEB

The decomposed remains suspected to be of a 19-year-old youth who had been missing since May last year were found in Sokom village in Manipur's Chandel district, police said.Ngangom Navy of Sugnu in Kakching district had been missing since May 28 last year and has been presumed dead.The search for Ngangom resumed on Wednesday after a video went viral on Tuesday on social media where suspected militants were seen decapitating his head. Manipur Police identified the site where the video was shot and a renewed search was carried out during which the decomposed skeletal remains were found on Wednesday.Clothes seen on the video seemed to match with those that were also recovered, police said, adding that "forensic experts are examining the remains to confirm the identity".The remains had been deposited at the JNIMS mortuary. —*PTI*

UDF says Ker govt is protecting Vandiperiyar rape culprit

T'PURAM, 1 FEB

Hours after Congress-led UDF slammed the state government in the Assembly for its alleged "carelessness" and "indifference" in the Vandiperiyar rape-cum-murder case, the Left administration suspended the police officer who investigated the matter.

The suspension order, issued by Additional Director General of Police (Law and Order) M R Ajithkumar, indicates that the action has been taken based on the adverse observations by the trial court against the investigating officer in the case.

The ADGP's order said that the investigating officer, presently posted in a police station in Ernakulam Rural district, has been placed under suspension with immediate effect pending enquiry against him.

The enquiry would be carried out by the Ernakulam Rural Additional SP, it said.

Earlier in the day, the opposition UDF accused

A court in Kerala had on 14 December last year acquitted a man accused of raping and killing a six-year-old girl ***PHOTO: PTI***

the Left government of "deliberately" trying to protect the accused in the case, right from the start, and claimed it was the reason behind his acquittal.

On 14 December last year, a court in Kerala acquitted a man accused of raping and killing a six-year-old girl, who was his neighbour, at Churukkulam estate in the mountainous Idukki district of the state in June 2021.

In the Assembly today, the opposition, in an adjournment motion seeking suspension of the scheduled business of the house, urged the government to order a reinvestigation into the case.

Pointing out that one-and-a-half months have gone by since the trial court verdict, the UDF criticised the "lethargic" and "unscientific" probe by the police and slammed the government for not taking any action against the investigating officer.

Denying the allegations in the motion and rejecting the opposition demand to suspend the scheduled business of the house, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan argued that the police had lodged a case in a timely manner and carried out an investigation. —*PTI*

'Centre okays Sabarimala airport'

T'PURAM, 1 FEB

Kerala government on Thursday said in the Assembly that the Central government has granted site and defence clearance for the Sabarimala Greenfield Airport project.

Chief Minister PinarayiVijayan said that an application for security clearance is under consideration of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

He was responding to a notice by CPI(M) MLA KU Jenish Kumar calling his attention to the necessity to expedite the construction of the Sabarimala Greenfield Airport.

Vijayan said that an environmental impact study report has been prepared and steps were being taken to submit it before the Union Ministry of Forests, Environment and Climate Change for approval.

Besides that, a seven-member expert committee, appointed to study the final Social Impact Assessment study report prepared by the Center for Management Development (CMD), has submitted its recommendations regarding the project, he said.

Based on the committee's recommendations, the process of acquiring around 2,570 acres of land for the construction of the airport has been initiated.

Vijayan further said that steps were also being taken to form a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) for the Sabarimala Airport and to select an agency to prepare the Detailed Project Report (DPR). —*PTI*

1 held for threatening judge over murder case

ALAPPUZHA, 1 FEB

Kerala police have arrested one person and two are under custody for threatening Mavelikkara Additional Sessions Judge on social media. This was after she pronounced the verdict in the murder of BJP OBC wing leader RanjithSreenivasan.

Kerala Police had on Wednesday increased the security cover given to Justice VG Sreedevi, after taking serious note of the online threats made against her. A senior police official told PTI that one person was arrested and two are under custody and their details will be revealed soon as the investigation is still on. The court had on Tuesday sentenced 15 people associated with PFI to death in the 2021 murder of the BJP OBC wing leader that took place in Alappuzha. —*PTI*

LAKHS OF FARMERS HIT

IMD to shut down all 199 district agromet units across country

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

India Meteorological Department has decided to discontinue the services of the 199 district agromet units that provide crucial and detailed weather-related advisories to lakhs of farmers at the block level, helping them reduce crop losses and increase income.

In an order issued on 17 January, the IMD said the services of the district agromet units (DAMU) will not be extended beyond the current financial year (2023-2024).

The official suggested the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) may have "centralised units instead of field units as the collection of data is automated".

The decision will directly impact thousands of farmers in these 199 districts in 32 states and Union Territories, according to the staff working at the units.

Scientists in the agriculture ministry have also acknowledged DAMUs' contribution to building climate resilience within the farming community and mentioned that the impact of discontinuing DAMU services will be more pronounced in the short term.

In 2015, the government launched the Gramin Krishi MausamSeva (GMSV) to provide crop and location-specific detailed advisories to farmers, aiding them in day-to-day decision-making.

A total of 130 agromet field units (AMFUs) have been set up in agro-climatic zones in the country over the years in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). AMFUs provide advisories at the zonal level, each catering to four to five districts.

In 2018, the government decided to extend the reach of GMSV by setting up 530 district agromet units on the premises of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK). However, the Covid pandemic impacted the process, and only 199 DAMUs could be set up. Each DAMU has two employees SMS Agromet and Agromet Observer.

The decision to wind up DAMUs will not only affect the families of their 398 employees but also lakhs of farmers dependent on them for crucial agromet advisories, which have helped increase their resilience against worsening weather and climate impacts, consequently reducing their losses.

—*PTI*

WINTER IS HERE

Tourists play with snow at Ridge amid the year's firt snowfall in Shimla on Thursday ***PHOTO: IANS***

HC junks plea on Kunbi certificate to Marathas

MUMBAI, 1 FEB

Bombay High Court on Thursday said a petitioner challenging the Maharashtra government's move to issue Kunbi certificates to Marathas could wait for a few more days for hearing on the plea, considering the caste certificates were being issued since November 2023.

The court made the remarks after Mangesh Sasane, who claims to be the chairman of the 'OBC Welfare Foundation', sought an urgent hearing on his public interest litigation (PIL) filed earlier this week.

The petition would be taken up for hearing on 6 February.

The PIL claimed that the state government, by granting Kunbi caste certificates to the Maratha community members, was "eating into" the reservation of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The PIL challenges five government resolutions (GRs) issued from 2004, permitting the Marathas to seek Kunbi caste certificates.

It claimed that earlier the process/scrutiny before granting Kunbi certificates to Marathas was strict but with every agitation by the Maratha community members seeking quota, the process was diluted and made easier.

Members of the Maratha community are rich and, "in fact, most of the ministers and chief ministers are from this community," it futher claimed.

However, the Kunbi community is a socially backward community that has been treated oppressively in the society, it said.

The petition claimed local Maratha leaders are taking advantage of the draft notification and are influencing the competent authority to issue Kunbi caste certificates to distant relatives of persons from the Maratha community.

It said the opportunities that were available to persons belonging to the OBC category have now turned into a full benefit for the Maratha community.

On 20 January, Maratha reservation activist Manoj Jarange began a march to Mumbai from AntarwaliSarathi in Jalna, demanding issuance of Kunbi certificates to all Marathas, which would entitle them to benefits under the quota earmarked for the OBCs.

The state government recently issued a draft notification stating that blood relatives of a Maratha person, who has records to show he belongs to the Kunbi community, would also be recognised as Kunbi.

An agrarian community, Kunbi falls in the OBC category, and Jarange, spearheading the agitation for reservation for the Marathas since last August, has been demanding Kunbi certificates for all Marathas to enable them to avail quota benefits in government jobs and education.

—*PTI*

4 booked after 100 suffer food poisoning

THANE, 1 FEB

Police registered an FIR against four people on Thursday, a day after more than 100 students of a private ashram school in Thane suffered from food poisoning after consuming the mid-day meal.

A total of 117 students, including 48 girls, were admitted to the Shahapur sub-district hospital after they suffered from food poisoning on Wednesday.

The SantGadgeMaharaj Primary and Secondary Ashram School (residential school for tribal children), where the incident took place, is located on the outskirts of Mumbai.

The school houses 290 students from Classes 1 to 10 and 168 of them, who were present on Wednesday, were served the food brought from outside.

The food was brought from outside on the occasion of the first death anniversary of a villager from Bhatsai.

PHOTO: PTI

A case was registered against the school superintendent, headmistress of the primary school, headmaster of the secondary school and a person who brought the food from outside, an official from the district rural police control room said.

—*PTI*

HC junks 20-year-old woman's plea to abort 28-week foetus

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Delhi High Court on Thursday refused to allow a 20-year-old unmarried woman to terminate her pregnancy of 28 weeks. It held that the foetus was "completely viable" and "foeticide cannot be permitted".

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act permits aborting a foetus at a maximum of 24 weeks. In case of substantial foetal abnormalities, subject to the permission of a medical board, termination can be done even after 24 weeks.

In her plea, the woman submitted she was in a consensual relationship and had come to know of her pregnancy only recently. Advocate Amit Mishra, representing the woman, said she learnt about it on 25 January when she was already 27 weeks pregnant.

She consulted doctors in order to terminate the pregnancy since she was not in a condition to bear the child, but they refused as it was beyond the 24-week period allowed under the MTP Act, the lawyer said.

The lawyer said nobody in her family knew about her pregnancy, and since she was unmarried, her case should be considered for MTP.He urged the court to direct the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi to medically examine the woman to ascertain her mental and physical condition as also how the foetus was doing.

The lawyer said nobody knew about her pregnancy, and since she was unmarried, her case should be considered for MTP ***PHOTO: PTI***

—*PTI*

WINTER RITUAL

Iranian Zoroastrian youth carry torches to set fire to a prepared pile of wood in a ceremony celebrating their ancient mid-winter Sadeh festival in outskirts of Tehran, Iran, on Tuesday. Hundreds of Zoroastrian minorities gathered after sunset to mark their ancient feast, creation of fire, dating back to Iran's pre-Islamic past. ***PHOTO: PTI***

Hard time for temple town as it fails to handle crowds

As half a million people converged on the gates of the new temple to the Hindu deity Ram, Brijesh Pathak looked on.

The devotees had turned up to catch a glimpse of Ram's idol installed at the grand structure built on the ruins of a 16th-century mosque demolished by a right-wing mob in 1992.

But as the crowd swelled, Pathak, the 32-year-old manager of a guesthouse, said, a stampede-like situation was created outside the temple premises. Buses and rickshaws were ordered off the streets, police barricades were put up and more security personnel were rushed to the small town, incapable of handling such a huge number of visitors.

"It was a flood of people. You could only see endless heads," Pathak told Al Jazeera.

Only a day ago, the city was India's most sought-after destination after Modi, along with a large number of Hindu saints, film stars and business leaders landed there to inaugurate the controversial temple.

But as the Prime Minister and the celebrities moved on, Ayodhya was left to deal with a new reality: it's a city that is now expected to receive millions of tourists and pilgrims every year, yet is ill-prepared to handle such volumes of visitors, local businesspeople and traders said.

Like the incomplete temple that was consecrated ahead of national elections – due between March and May – the city has been rushed into its new role.

On 23 January, after Modi and other celebrities flew out, several pilgrims were injured, and some had fractures, as throngs of devotees broke police barriers to enter the complex. In response, the state's Hindu nationalist chief minister returned to Ayodhya with top officials to manage the crisis. In New Delhi, Modi barred his ministers from visiting the temple for some weeks.

"It would take at least till 2027 for the temple to be complete," an engineer working inside the temple told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity.

Devotees wait to take 'darshan' of Ram Lalla a day after the 'Pran Pratishtha' ceremony at the Ram Mandir, in Ayodhya ***PHOTO: PTI***

'We can't handle half a million people'

Amid freezing cold at a roadside eatery, some workers wearing T-shirts stood behind clay ovens, flipping dough and juggling plates. It's a joint recommended by the locals for having comparatively better food" in Ayodhya.

As orders piled up, the workers lost their ease. Waiters began to turn a deaf ear to streaming customers. A cup of tea could take forever to arrive.

"Ayodhya is not equipped to host so many tourists," Nand Kumar Gupta, president of a local traders' union, told Al Jazeera. "We are a very small town and we cannot handle half a million people. Nobody has trained us to take and manage 50 orders at the same time."

Before the Ram Mandir, as the temple is known, was inaugurated, Ayodhya largely saw only tourists for religious fairs hosted during Hindu festivals. Many of the visitors were from nearby villages.

"Our restaurants are conditioned to cater to the villagers' needs and living standards, not for people who need air conditioners in their eateries," said Gupta, 52. "We just do not have a system in place to do this."

> Before the Ram Mandir, was inaugurated,Ayodhya largely saw only tourists for religious fairs hosted during festivals. Many of the visitors were nearby villages

The entire town in the east of Uttar Pradesh was given a multimillion-dollar facelift as Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which controls both the federal and state governments, projected Ayodhya as the Vatican of the Hindus.

But Ayodhya's revamp for the Ram Mandir project has also put local businesses under considerable stress, Gupta said.

"Nearly 4,000 shops were partly demolished [during the facelift] and 1,600 shops were completely wiped off," he said. "The upcoming economic prosperity in Ayodhya is for the big corporates, not us."

'We will be pushed out of the city'

Indeed, the town, being developed as the main Hindu pilgrimage in future, is already attracting big money, with projects worth 8,500 million Indian rupees (about $10bn) sanctioned for the uplift.

Leading hotel companies, including Marriott, Radisson and Wyndham, have signed deals to build star hotels. Advertisements – one featuring Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan – are calling on India's rich to invest in homes and resorts on the banks of the Saryu River.The town's railway station has been revamped. A new airport has come up, though it was not equipped enough to park nearly a dozen chartered planes carrying dignitaries that landed in Ayodhya on 22 January.

"The government has combined religious sentiments, politics and economics here and the local administration is just full of themselves to see this reality," Gupta told Al Jazeera. "Eventually, it looks like all of us will be pushed out of the city." *—Courtesy,Al Jazeera*

SALAR ساڈا

India is close to eliminating kala-azar 'black fever'

When Sishu Kumari started working as a rural health worker in 2008, there were 33,000 cases of kala-azar, or black fever, in India.

Two years later, India would miss its first target deadline to eliminate the deadly infection. The future seemed bleak.

But India has since made rapid progress in tackling the tropical disease, with the number of cases dropping to 520 last year, according to government data.

Now on 30 January, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Neglected Tropical Disease Day, India is on the verge of eliminating kala-azar.

Dr. Nirmal Kumar Ganguly, former director general of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), called this a "significant gain" for the world's most populous country.

Dr. Kavita Singh, director for South Asia at the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi), said, "The achievement could strengthen the commitment to future public health initiatives and potentially attract more support and resources for similar endeavors towards other vector-borne diseases."

What is kala-azar?

Kala-azar — also known as visceral leishmaniasis — is a severe form of the vector-borne disease leishmaniasis caused by protozoan parasites that are transmitted by the bite of infected female sandflies.

According to the Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF), kala-azar is the second deadliest parasitic disease after malaria, affecting 200 million people in 76 countries.

The disease is characterized by symptoms like anemia, fever, weight loss, and enlargement of the liver and spleen. There is a treatment, but kala-azar is invariably fatal if the treatment is not administered in time.

India, Bangladesh and Nepal were considered hot spots of the disease in the South Asian region. In India, the cases of kala-azar are predominantly found in four states: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

In 2023, Bangladesh announced the elimination of kala-azar.

Why is it so hard to diagnose kala-azar?

One main reason for the prevalence of kala-azar is the delay in detection. The disease starts as a mild, slowly progressing condition.

"Patients often dismiss it as a regular fever and refuse to seek medical care, at times, up to a month or more," said Kumari, the rural health worker.

Kumari is an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) health care facilitator. While in the field, she and her fellow ASHA workers are often approached by people who have had fever lasting more than 15 days, Kumari said.

ASHA workers have played a big role in getting to the hard-to-reach rural pockets of India and educating the masses about the disease and its treatment. Their work, however, is not without challenges. Oftentimes, when they reach a village set for insecticidal spraying — a technique used to eradicate the sandfly vector — residents refuse, thinking their homes would be harmed.

"We then have to educate the people that from one case of kala-azar in the village, it can spread to more people," Kumari noted.

Roadblocks India had to overcomeAccording to Ganguly, the battle against kala-azar dragged on for so long because of various factors."Initially, all the drugs were toxic," he said.

Another reason for its prevalence was that the disease primarily impacted some of the poorest in the country, the doctor added. Even though treatment was available, "infected people (due to lack of education) did not know where to go.""Moreover, vectors (sandflies) are difficult to eliminate," the former ICMR Chief pointed out.

Singh also believes that the patients' poverty was one of the reasons for the delay in eliminating the disease. Their socioeconomic status put them on the blind spot of profit-driven Big Pharma, she said. "That's why the process of finding safe and effective treatments for these diseases has been slow," according to the DNDi doctor.

In 2014, DNDi was one of the organizations that helped introduce the single-dose drug Liposomal amphotericin B (LAMB) to be a part of the Indian Ministry of Health's kala-azar elimination program. LAMB played a big part in the gradual reduction of the number of cases.

What steps India needs to take to keep up the fight?

According to WHO guidelines, for India to sustain this elimination, less than one case should be recorded in a population of 10,000 people. Health officials should maintain this status for the next three years.India had previously missed kala-azar elimination deadlines in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2023.

—Courtesy, DW News

According to the Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF), kala-azar is the second deadliest parasitic disease after malaria, affecting 200 million people in 76 countries ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

LETTERS Write to us at salar@salar.news

Chaos in the Red Sea disrupting exports, snarling supplychains

Demand for Basmati, the long-grain aromatic rice, from traditional buyers in the Middle East, the US and Europe has dropped as it has become costly. The reason is the escalating tensions in the Red Sea, the shortest and most efficient trade route for ships moving from Asia to Europe.

Attacks by Iranian-backed Houthis from Yemen on commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea have forced shippers to avoid one of the world's most crucial trade routes. The alternative longer route around the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa has added more than 3,500 nautical miles (6,500km) to the journey and close to a half-month of sailing time to each trip, significantly increasing shipping costs.

Exporting Basmati has become a challenge for shippers as freight costs have shot up as high as five times with an increase in insurance premiums, shortage of containers and longer transit time, said, Vijay Kumar Setia, director of Chaman Lal Setia Exports Ltd and former president of the All India Rice Exporters' of India.

Part of the inventory is lying at various ports or processing units, while some stock is now being sold in the domestic market, resulting in a fall in prices by about eight percent in the local market.

Over 4.5 million tonnes of basmati rice is shipped out of the country annually. About 35 percent of about 7.5 million tonnes of production is shipped to Europe, North America, North Africa and the Middle East through the Red Sea.

"Buyers are hesitant to take at higher prices," said Setia. "Some exports are going on, but business isn't that smooth. We are losing profits because of higher logistic costs."

Like Basmati, chaos in the Red Sea is disrupting shipments of produce from tea to spices and grapes to buffalo meats resulting in losses to exporters. Similarly, imports of fertilisers, sunflower oil, machinery components and electronic goods in the country are getting delayed, raising the risk of higher costs to consumers.

This has raised concern that the unrest will lead to supply-chain snarls and contraction of trade, and halt a slowdown in food inflation.

The country is heavily reliant on the Red Sea route through the Suez Canal for its trade with Europe, North America, North Africa and the Middle East. These regions accounted for about 50 percent of India's exports of 18 trillion rupees ($217bn) and about 30 percent of imports of 17 trillion rupees ($205bn) in the year ended March 2023, according to CRISIL Ratings.

Shipments are currently getting delayed by 21-28 days. The crisis could cost the country more than $30bn in exports for the fiscal year ending March ***PHOTO: PTI***

Shipments are currently getting delayed by 21-28 days. The crisis could cost the country more than $30bn in exports for the fiscal year ending March, hitting $451bn of exports a year ago by around 6.8 percent, said Sachin Chaturvedi, director-general of the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, a New Delhi-based think tank.Official estimates of the impact on trade in India will be known when the government releases export and import data around mid-February for January.

Shipping costs rise

Meanwhile, shipping prices have increased. According to Drewry's World Container Index, the average price of transporting a 40-feet (12-metre) container on a cargo ship rose 161 percent to $3,964 on January 25 from $1,521 on December 14.The chaos has brought concern for India. Around half a dozen ships heading toward India or with Indian crews on board have been attacked – allegedly by Houthis or hijacked by armed pirates. In response, India has increased its maritime presence in the Arabian Sea by deploying about a dozen warships.

Russia emerged as one of the biggest crude suppliers to India in 2023, accounting for more than one-third of its imports. Unlike other sectors, there is no diversion of Russian vessels carrying crude oil bound for India through the Red Sea, as per S&P Global.

But the supply of sunflower oil has become tight for India, the world's biggest importer of the vegetable oil. As most of the vessels from Russia and Ukraine are being rerouted through Cape of Good Hope, freight costs have increased by 35 percent and transit time increased by 15 days, said Sandeep Bajoria, CEO of Sunvin Group, a vegetable oil brokerage. Part of the higher costs has been passed to consumers, he said.Similarly, shipments of fertilisers have been delayed and logistics costs have risen, minister of chemicals and fertilisers, Mansukh Mandaviya, told reporters, adding India will have no shortage of fertilisers critical for the country's food security as there are adequate reserves.

But the crisis is hurting buffalo meat export. India is one of the major buffalo meat suppliers to the international market. About 60 percent of the country's shipments go through the Red Sea to countries including North Africa and Russia.Freight costs have risen three times and shipments are getting delayed for about two to three weeks, said Fauzan Alavi, spokesperson of the All India Meat and Livestock Exporters Association.Tea exports are also bearing huge losses as logistic costs have gone up by at least 60 percent and transit time doubled, said P K Bhattacharjee, secretary-general of the Tea Association of India.

"Now we are expecting the Red Sea crisis will prolong for a pretty long time," said Sahai of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations. "If this happens, the supply chain will continue to be disrupted and containing inflation will be delayed."The government has set up an interministerial panel to monitor the crisis.

—Courtesy, Al Jazeera

PHOTO: ANI

Myanmar: EU condemns human rights violations

NAYPYIDAW, 1 FEB

Three years since 1 February, 2021 the day when the military in Myanmar overthrew its democratically elected government, foreign ministers of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, United States, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs on behalf of the European Union have condemned sexual and gender-based violence and the restriction of fundamental freedoms by the military regime. The joint statement reiterated their call for the Commander-in-Chief and the military to change course, immediately ceasing violence against civilians, releasing all unjustly detained political prisoners, allowing full humanitarian access, and creating space for inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders. *—ANI*

Norway braces for most powerful storm in 3 decades

COPENHAGEN, 1 FEB

Residents of central Norway awoke to scenes of havoc and homes without power on Thursday following the country's most powerful storm in more than three decades. Hurricane-force winds hit parts of the Scandinavian country, with gusts of up 180 kilometers per hour (112 miles per hour). Near Laerdal, a small, picturesque town northeast of Bergen, Norway's second-largest city, a bus with 14 passengers was blown off a road, though no injuries were reported, police said. Some areas were flooded, and airlines and ferry operators temporarily suspended service. There were scattered reports of closed schools, roads, tunnels and bridges both Wednesday and Thursday. The storm, named Ingunn by Norwegian meteorologists, landed in central Norway on Wednesday afternoon before moving north Thursday. The Meteorological Institute had issued a red warning, its highest alert, for the Arctic region. *—AP*

US hikes visa fees of non-immigrant visas

NEW YORK, 1 FEB

The US has announced a steep increase in fees for various categories of non-immigrant visas like the H-1B, L-1 and EB-5, the most popular among Indians. The fee hike, first after 2016, will come into force from 1 April. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The EB-5 programme, launched by the US government in 1990, enables high-net-worth foreign investors to obtain a US visa for themselves and their families by investing a minimum of USD 5,00,000 in a US business that helps create 10 jobs for American workers. *—PTI*

Russian anti-war band leaves Thailand for Israel

MOSCOW, 1 FEB

An anti-war Russian-Belarusian rock band says all its members have left Thailand for Israel after fears they would be deported to Russia. Bi-2 had been playing in a Thai resort popular with Russian tourists when members were arrested for unauthorised shows. Human rights activists urged Thailand not to deport them for fear they would be persecuted in their home countries. Now the band says it is on its way to Tel Aviv in Israel. The band's frontman, Yegor "Lyova" Bortnik, has already arrived in the Israeli city, Radio Free Europe reports. On its Facebook page, the band announced on Wednesday: "All the musicians in Bi-2 have successfully left Thailand and are heading to Tel Aviv. *—BBC News*

Zelenskyy may want a new boss to replace Army Chief

Zelenskyy had decided to fire Zaluzhni before Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv

KYIV, 1 FEB

Kyiv based analyst Volodymyr Fesenko said Al Jazeera that there is "psychological tension" between Zaluzhny and the president *PHOTO: ZSU.GOV.UA*

Rumours and allegations have swirled in recent weeks over the dismissal of Valerii Zaluzhni, Ukraine's Army chief.

Last week, several lawmakers and insiders claimed the taciturn and immensely popular 50-year-old four-star general was dismissed and set to lead Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy decided to fire him in early December after Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv, the Ukrainska Pravda newspaper reported, citing an unnamed source.

But on Monday, Defence Minister Rustem Umerov said: "This is not true." Even though the ministry does not hold sway over Zaluzhny, in the case of a potential firing, it would have to submit a "recommendation" for his dismissal to Zelenskyy, Ukraine's nominal commander-in-chief.

"There's nothing to talk about. There was no dismissal. I have nothing to add," Zelenskyy's spokesperson Serhiy Nikiforov said in televised remarks on Monday. But several observers have doubts. "There was an attempt to convince Zaluzhny to switch to another job voluntarily, on his own. The attempt wasn't very successful, so the matter has been postponed," Kyiv-based analyst Volodymyr Fesenko told Al Jazeera.

But the dismissal "is a matter of time and circumstances", he said. There is "psychological tension" between Zaluzhny and the president, who remains dissatisfied with the failures of last year's counterattack, Fesenko said.

Several counterstrikes in late 2022 liberated almost half of Russia-occupied areas and assured the Ukrainian public that the 2023 summer campaign in the east and south would succeed. But Russia used a lull in hostilities to build multi-layer defence installations along the 1,000km-long (621-mile) front line and deployed hundreds of thousands of newly mobilised servicemen to man them.

Zaluzhny's months-long counterattack morphed into a World War I-like trench war as his forces gained, lost and regained tiny patches of land amid harrowing losses of soldiers and Western-supplied weaponry. Even the failed mutiny and disbandment of the Wagner mercenary group, which spearheaded Russia's advance, didn't help the Ukrainian counterattacks.

The failure was variously blamed on Zaluzhny's tactical mistakes and delays in the supply of Western weaponry such as fighter jets and missiles. As Zaluzhny has not come up with a new action plan for 2024, Zelenskyy has occasionally bypassed him in managing the armed forces, Fesenko said.

—Courtesy, Al Jazeera

China state cyber group hacked key assets, says FBI

WASHINGTON, 1 FEB

PHOTO: US FBI

The US has managed to dismantle the hacking efforts of a Chinese state-sponsored group that had been targeting key public infrastructure like the power grid and pipelines, says the FBI.

The FBI's director told lawmakers it had executed a campaign to shut down the "Volt Typhoon" group. That group hacked into hundreds of older office routers to access data on US assets, Christopher Wray alleged.

The Chinese government is yet to respond to the accusations. However, it has previously denied accusations of state-sponsored cyber warfare against other countries. It has, in the past, also accused the US of being "the world's biggest hacking empire and global cyber thief."

Wray on Wednesday told a US congressional committee that China was deliberately laying groundwork to cripple key US infrastructure systems in the event of a hostile conflict.

The hacking efforts of the "Volt Typhoon" group had first came to light last May in the US, after Microsoft warned the group had targeted several public assets including hacking into government email accounts.

The FBI says the group targeted a broad sweep of the country's critical infrastructure including water treatment systems, the power grid, transportation systems, oil and gas pipelines as well as telecommunication networks.

Wray said the China state-sponsored group had managed to install malware and take over hundreds of old and outdated routers connected to those infrastructure assets. "The Volt Typhoon malware enabled China to hide, among other things, pre-operational reconnaissance and network exploitation against critical infrastructure," he told the US congressional committee on US-China competition.

He said this showed the hackers were preparing to "wreak chaos and cause real-world harm to American citizens and communities."

"If and when China decides the time has come to strike, they're not focused just on political or military targets," he added.

—BBC News

UN has not been a stellar body: Bibi

TEL AVIV, 1 FEB

Netanyahu *PHOTO: PTI*

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem on Wednesday, met with a delegation of ambassadors to the UN, including from Malta, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Slovenia and Sierra Leone and spoke with them about how UN workers have aided Hamas terrorists in Gaza.

"The UN has not been a stellar organisation when it comes to dealing with Israel," he told them. "It's often unbelievably tilted. It has the UN Human Rights Commission, so-called Human Rights Commission that devotes an enormous part of its resolutions against Israel, and nothing against Iran or Yemen or other arenas of savagery and aggression."

"I think it's time that the international community and the UN itself understand that UNRWA's mission has to end," said Netanyahu.

"UNRWA is self-perpetuating. It is self-perpetuating also in its desire to keep alive the Palestinian refugee issue. And we need to get other UN agencies and other aid agencies replacing UNRWA if we're going to solve the problem of Gaza as we intend to do.

There are other agencies in the UN. There are other agencies in the world. They have to replace UNRWA."

"UNRWA is totally infiltrated with Hamas," he added. "It has been in the service of Hamas and its schools, and in many other things. I say this with great regret because we hoped that there would be an objective and constructive body to offer aid. We need such a body today in Gaza. *—ANI*

'COORDINATED ATTACKS'

21 terrorists killed by Pakistan forces after militant attacks

KARACHI, 1 FEB

Pakistani security forces have killed at least 21 terrorists linked to a banned separatist group in the troubled Balochistan province since Monday night in an operation launched after militants launched three coordinated attacks, including one on a high-security prison, in the area, a security official said on Thursday.

Following a brazen attack by heavily armed terrorists on the Mach town and Kolpur areas in Balochistan on Monday night, the security forces launched an operation to repulse the attacks and hunt down the perpetrators. "As a result of the operation in Mach and Kolpur so far 21 terrorists have been eliminated," the official said. Four security personnel and two civilians have also been killed during the operation according to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military's media wing.

> **As a result of the operation in Mach and Kolpur so far 21 terrorists have been eliminated**
>
> -Pakistan security forces

The ISPR has so far officially confirmed the death of 12 terrorists but the security official without wanting to be named said 21 terrorists belonging to the Baloch Liberation Army Mujahid Brigade had been killed. He also said that the death toll in the security forces could be higher but so far there was no confirmation from the concerned authorities.

On Wednesday, the military's media wing, reported that multiple terrorists, including suicide bombers, launched attacks on Mach and Kolpur, apparently the target being to penetrate the Central Mach Jail where several high profile of the banned groups and death row prisoners are jailed. *—PTI*

Nuclear tech: US, Russia, China battle for rule

WASHINGTON, 1 FEB

The US, Russia and China are battling for dominance to build and sell small modular reactors (SMRs), as per CNN.

SMRs are smaller and less costly to build than traditional, large-scale reactors. They are fast becoming the next great hope for a nuclear renaissance as the world looks towards cutting fossil fuels. The Biden administration and American companies are putting billions of dollars into SMRs in a bid for business and global influence. *—ANI*

'Afghan women should get a day in court against Taliban'

NEW YORK, 1 FEB

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is expected to address the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule which has imposed a brutal crackdown on women and girls, the Human Rights Watch highlighted in a report.

The Human Rights Watch in their report, also emphasised that the Afghan women and girls deserve their day in court against the Taliban, stressing that "the ICJ could play an important role."

The support of just one state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) could make that happen, the report added.

It further reiterated that since the Taliban took control in August 2021, it has imposed a brutal crackdown on women and girls, violating rights in every aspect of their lives, including their ability to study, work, live free from violence, access health care, participate in public life, move freely, or even just walk in the park.

"These abuses continue to escalate and are blatant violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Afghanistan ratified in 2003," it said. *—ANI*

SENATE HEARING

I'm sorry for all: Zuckerberg apologises

WASHINGTON, 1 FEB

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg during the congressional hearing on online child safety *PHOTO: AP*

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has apologised to families who say their children had been harmed by social media, during a fiery hearing in the US Senate.

Zuckerberg - who runs Instagram and Facebook - turned to them and said "no-one should go through" what they had. He and the bosses of TikTok, Snap, X and Discord were questioned for almost four hours by senators from both parties. Lawmakers wanted to know what they are doing to protect children online.

Legislation is currently going through Congress which aims to hold social media companies to account for material posted on their platforms. Wednesday's hearing was a rare opportunity for the US senators to question tech bosses.

Zuckerberg and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew voluntarily agreed to testify - but the heads of Snap, X (formerly Twitter) and messaging platform Discord initially refused and were sent government-issued subpoenas.

Behind the five tech bosses sat families who said their children had self-harmed or killed themselves as a result of social media content.

They made their feelings known throughout, hissing when the CEOs entered and applauding when lawmakers asked tough questions. While the hearing mostly focused on the protection of children from online sexual exploitation, the questions varied widely as the senators took advantage of having five powerful executives there under oath.

- Zuckerberg and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew voluntarily agreed to testify - but the heads of Snap, X (formerly Twitter) and messaging platform Discord initially refused and were sent government-issued subpoenas

TikTok - which is owned by Chinese company ByteDance - CEO Mr Chew was asked whether his company shared US users' data with the Chinese government, which he denied. US Senator Tom Cotton asked Chew, who is from Singapore, if he had ever belonged to the Chinese Communist Party. "Senator, I'm Singaporean. No," Chew replied.

—BBC News

POLITICAL TURMOIL

The raid happened a day after Imran Khan were sentenced to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment each in a corruption case *PHOTO: AP*

Pak govt raids Imran's party secretariat

ISLAMABAD, 1 FEB

In a crackdown against Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan's party, police and security officials in plainclothes reportedly raided and took control of its central secretariat here and stopped members from entering the premises, a media report said on Thursday.

Quoting unnamed party sources, Dawn News reported that the raid happened a day after Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment each in a corruption case. It came just before a general body meeting of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party on Wednesday in Islamabad's Sector G-8.

The PTI general body, however, managed to hold a virtual meeting in which it decided to hold organisational elections within a fortnight.

Khan's party faced numerous troubles before the 8 February general elections starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and several other party leaders.

An official of the capital police denied the allegation, pointing out that a raid could not be conducted without having permission from a magistrate and no such order was issued on Wednesday.

He claimed on condition of anonymity they went there to provide security.

"[As] a judgement against Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi was announced, there was a possibility that a protest would be held there. Police did not enter the secretariat and remained outside," the unnamed official said.

A PTI representative, requesting anonymity, said the general body meeting was planned to be held in Islamabad, all provincial capitals and Gilgit Baltistan for which an arrangement was made to connect all stations through the internet.

—PTI

39 PTI WORKERS ARRESTED

ISLAMABAD, 1 FEB

The Pakistan police have intensified the crackdown on Pakistan Tehree-i-Insaf (PTI) leaders and workers and have picked up over three dozen more party workers for being allegedly involved in violence during a rally at Teen Talwar over the weekend, Dawn reported.

They have been arrested on charges of rioting and attacking policemen, among other crimes. "39 more persons have been apprehended on charges of rioting, attacking a policeman, and ransacking official vehicles," a police spokesperson said. The number of activists apprehended during these three days stands at 72, the spokesperson said. According to Dawn, they were being identified with the help of digital evidence against them, the spokesperson added. Just one week ahead of the general elections, the law enforcement agency has been carrying out raids across the city to arrest PTI workers. *—ANI*

Pak's monthly inflation rate increases to 28.5%

ISLAMABAD, 1 FEB

Amid the economic crisis in Pakistan, the caretaker government revised its projection, stating that inflation may remain around 28.5 per cent in January due to food supply shocks, Express Tribune reported on Wednesday.

This comes two days after the central bank in Pakistan raised its inflation forecast. In its flagship monthly economic outlook report, the Pakistan finance ministry anticipates inflation to be around 27.5 per cent -28.5 per cent in January, a 3.5 per cent increase from the previous forecast made a month ago.

This adjustment reflects ground realities, indicating no relief in the prices of essential goods and utility items. The report, prepared by the Economic Advisor Wing of the finance ministry, also suggests that the inflation rate may remain around 27.5 per cent in February.

—ANI

SL's controversial online safety bill becomes law

COLOMBO, 1 FEB

Sri Lanka's Parliament on Thursday endorsed a controversial bill to regulate online content despite criticism from the Opposition that claimed it will stifle freedom of speech.

Parliament's communications office in a release said that Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena certified the bill with his signature.

The Parliament had approved the bill with amendments last week. The new legislation would lead to the establishment of the Online Safety Commission which is empowered to make punitive rulings on offenses. A false statement online would be liable, if convicted, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding five hundred thousand Sri Lankan rupees. Earlier, the bill was severely criticised as one which impinged on the freedom of expression. *—PTI*

Rupee rises 8 paise to 82.96 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 1 FEB

The rupee appreciated by 8 paise to close at 82.96 against the US dollar on Thursday after the government hinted at faster fiscal consolidation and lower borrowings in its interim Budget for 2024-25. However, a strong greenback against major rivals overseas and subdued domestic equity markets restricted the sharp gain in the domestic unit, forex traders said.Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday hiked capital expenditure by 11 per cent for the next fiscal to sustain a world-beating economic growth rate while trimming the deficit in a reform-oriented interim budgetAt the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 83.02 against the dollar. During the session, the local unit touched a high of 82.93 and a low of 83.03.—*PTI*

Gold gains ₹100; silver plunges ₹600

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Gold prices increased Rs 100 to Rs 63,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid rise in the precious metal's prices in the overseas markets, according to HDFC Securities.In the previous close, the yellow metal had finished at Rs 63,350 per 10 grams.However, silver prices plunged Rs 600 to Rs 76,100 per kilogram, while it had ended at Rs 76,700 per kg in the previous trade."In the international markets, gold was quoting with gains at USD 2,044 per ounce, up USD 4 from the previous close."Gold prices gained ground on Thursday due to demand for safe haven assets amid concerns over Middle East conflict as well as US Federal Reserve's less aggressive monetary policy outlook. "...investors continue to be concerned that the escalating conflict in the Middle East could spark a broader war, which, coupled with China's sluggish economic growth, bolsters the value of the safe-haven precious metal,"Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. However, silver was trading lower at USD 22.80 per ounce.—*PTI*

ED searches India Cements Ltd offices in FEMA probe

CHENNAI, 1 FEB

Enforcement Directorate (ED) has conducted searches at the offices of leading Chennai-based cement manufacturer-- India Cements Ltd.-- as part of a foreign exchange violation investigation, official sources said on Thursday.Two office premises in Chennai and one in Delhi were covered by the federal probe agency over the last two days, as per provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), the sources said.The probe pertains to the affairs of its associate company India Cements Capital Ltd (ICCL) and transfer of funds abroad worth about Rs 550 crore, they said.The role of some alleged dubious agents and directors are under the probe scanner of the ED, they said.An official comment from the company to a PTI query is awaited. Founded in 1946, the company said on its website that "while retaining cement over the years as its mainstay, India Cements has ventured into related fields like shipping, captive power and coal mining." —*PTI*

Maruti Suzuki's total vehicle sales rise 5% in January

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Maruti Suzuki India's total vehicle sales, including exports, increased 5 per cent at 1,99,364 units in January from 1,72,535 units in the same month last year, the company said in a statement on Thursday. This was the highest-ever monthly sales volume for the Gurugram-based car maker, as per the statement. The total domestic sales grew 13 per cent at 1,70,214 vehicles as against 1,51,367 units in the month a year ago, it said.MSI also sold 23,921 vehicles in the overseas markets in the previous month, as per the statement. —*PTI*

Paytm sees ₹300-500cr blow as customers can't top up PPBL accounts

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Fintech firm Paytm sees an impact of Rs 300-500 crore on its annual operational profit as its customers will not be able to add money to their wallets, FASTagetc following RBI barring Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account.

In December, 41 crore UPI remittances were made through Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL).

The central bank on Wednesday barred PPBL from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, prepaid instruments, wallets, and FASTags, among others after February 29, 2024.

The action against PPBL followed a comprehensive system audit report and subsequent compliance validation report of external auditors.

"Depending on the nature of the resolution, the company expects this action to have a worst case impact of Rs 300-500 crore on its annual EBITDA going forward. However, the company expects to continue on its trajectory to improve its profitability," Paytm said in a regulatory filing.

Action against PPBL followed a system audit report and compliance validation report of external auditors **PHOTO: PTI**

"OCL, as a payments company, works with various banks (not just Paytm Payments Bank), on various payments products. OCL started to work with other banks after the embargo. We now will accelerate the plans and completely move to other bank partners. Going forward, OCL will be working only with other banks, and not with PPBL," Paytm said.

- In December, 41 crore UPI remittances were made through Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL)

On 11 March, 2022, RBI had barred PPBL from onboarding new customers with immediate effect.

Earlier, Indian Highways Management Company (IHMCL), the arm of NHAI, had barred PPBL from issuing fresh FASTags after it found that it was not following the parameters prescribed in the service-level agreement.

"The next phase of OCL's journey is to continue to expand its payments and financial services business, only in partnerships with other banks," the filing said.

The company said that its financial services such as loan distribution, insurance distribution and equity broking, are not in any way related to PPBL and are expected to be unaffected by this direction.

Paytm Payment Gateway business (online merchants) will continue to offer payment solutions to its existing merchants.

The filing said that OCL and PPSL will move the nodal to other banks during this period. "OCL will pursue partnerships with various other banks, to offer various payment products to its customers," Paytm said.

—*PTI*

Markets turn choppy on Budget day; Sensex, Nifty settle lower

Nifty dipped 28.25 points or 0.13 per cent to 21,697.45

MUMBAI, 1 FEB

Benchmark equity indices ended lower on the Budget day on Thursday as investors opted for profit-taking amid mixed cues.

After shedding early gains, the markets turned volatile during the presentation of the interim Budget, where in the capital expenditure outlay was marginally hiked but there were no major announcements. The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 106.81 points or 0.15 per cent to settle at 71,645.30. During the day, it gyrated between a high of 72,151.02 and a low of 71,574.89.

The Nifty dipped 28.25 points or 0.13 per cent to 21,697.45. It oscillated between the day's high of 21,832.95 and a low of 21,658.75.

Market sentiments were also dampened after the US Federal Reserve indicated it likely won't cut interest rates in March.

Maruti, Power Grid, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, NTPC, HDFC Bank, ITC and IndusInd Bank were the gainers **PHOTO: PTI**

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday hiked capital expenditure by 11 per cent for the next fiscal to sustain world-beating economic growth rate while trimming the deficit in a reform-oriented interim Budget that also gave relief to common man from disputed small tax demands of up to Rs 25,000.

Presenting a vote on account or an interim Budget for 2024-25, Sitharaman proposed no changes in income tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as customs duty. In less than an hour-long budget speech, she presented the Modi government's achievements in the last 10 years that transformed India from being a 'fragile' economy to the world's fastest-growing major economy. She hiked capital expenditure to Rs 11.11 lakh crore for 2024-25 while trimming the fiscal deficit for this financial year to 5.8 per cent, from the budgeted 5.9 per cent of GDP, and further lowering to 5.1 per cent in the next fiscal.

- FM on Thursday hiked capital expenditure by 11 per cent for the next fiscal to sustain world-beating economic growth rate

Meanwhile, the US FED's decision to maintain rates without clear guidance on future cuts dampened market sentiments, he added.

Among the Sensex firms, Larsen & Toubro, UltraTech Cement, JSW Steel, Titan, Bajaj Finance, Wipro, Tech Mahindra and Nestle were the major laggards.

Maruti, Power Grid, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, NTPC, HDFC Bank, ITC and IndusInd Bank were the gainers.

In Asian markets, Seoul and Hong Kong settled in the green while Tokyo and Shanghai ended lower.

European markets were trading on a mixed note. The US markets ended sharply lower on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.66 per cent to USD 81.08 a barrel. —*PTI*

INTERIM BUDGET 2024

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents Interim Budget 2024 In the Lok Sabha on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Govt to borrow ₹14.13Lcr to meet revenue shortfall

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday proposed to borrow Rs 14.13 lakh crore by issuing dated securities to meet revenue shortfall in the next financial year starting on 1 April.

This is lower than last year's gross borrowing estimate of Rs 15.43 lakh crore, which was the highest ever.

The lower borrowing estimate for 2024-25 is on account of growing tax revenue and the government's resolve to meet its fiscal consolidation roadmap.

About net borrowing estimate, Sitharaman while presenting the interim Budget for 2024-25 said it would be Rs 11.75 lakh crore during the next financial year.

As a result, the government would make repayment of Rs 2,37,818 crore during the year.

"The gross and net market borrowings through dated securities during 2024-25 are estimated at Rs 14.13 and Rs 11.75 lakh crore respectively.

Both will be less than that in 2023-24. Now that the private investments are happening at scale, the lower borrowings by the Central Government will facilitate larger availability of credit for the private sector," she said.

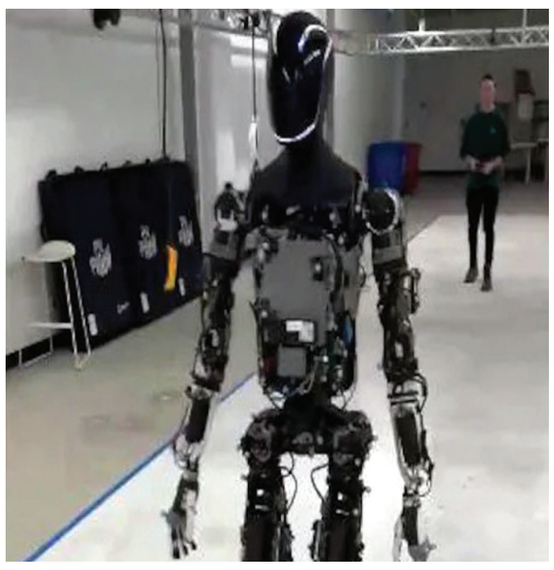
There are signs of private investment picking up in the steel and cement sector due to massive capital expenditure by the government.

Against the estimate of Rs 10 lakh crore for 2023-24, the government has earmarked Rs 11.11 lakh crore during the next year.

As per the revised estimate for FY24, the capital expenditure would be Rs 9.5 lakh crore, short by Rs 50,000 crore over the BE for the current fiscal.

—*PTI*

HUMANOID ROBOT



Elon Musk's Tesla developed a prototype humanoid robot that according to him contributes to humanity. Musk expects there to be over 1 billion humanoid robots on Earth in the 2040s **PHOTO: X**

Manufacturing sector climbs to 4-month high

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

India's manufacturing sector growth climbed to a four-month high in January as a sharper upturn in new orders boosted output growth amid mild cost inflation, a monthly survey said on Thursday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) recovered from an 18-month low of 54.9 in December to 56.5 in January.

The latest reading highlighted the strongest improvement in the health of the sector since last September.

In Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

"India's final manufacturing PMI showed that manufacturing activity accelerated in January. Current output expanded on robust demand, with domestic orders growing at a faster pace than export orders," Ines Lam, Economist at HSBC, said.

Lam further added that "the input price index inched up, but manufacturers were able to pass on some of the cost pressures to consumers, as suggested by the small rise in the output price index."

According to the survey, new orders placed with Indian goods producers rose at a sharp pace in January, and one that was the strongest in four months. Growth was reportedly boosted by marketing efforts and demand buoyancy.

International sales also expanded at a quicker pace. Goods producers reported stronger demand from clients spread across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas.

Goods producers collectively recorded the fastest increase in outstanding business volumes in 15 months, with demand strength reportedly exerting pressure on their capacities.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of survey participants opted to keep payroll numbers unchanged in January. —*PTI*

Goods producers collectively recorded the fastest increase in outstanding business volumes in 15 months **PHOTO: PTI**

PHOTO: AGENCIES

SOLAR SOLUTIONS STOCKS RALLY POST BUDGET

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Shares of solar solution providers KPI Green Energy and Sterling and Wilson climbed in the afternoon trade on Thursday after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced rooftop solarisation to ensure free electricity of up to 300 units per month for one crore households.

KPI Green Energy stock rallied 9.50 per cent to reach its 52-week high of Rs 1,997.15 on the BSE. Shares of Websol Energy System climbed 4.99 per cent to hit its one-year peak of Rs 388.15, Sterling and Wilson Renewable Energy jumped 4.16 per cent and Adani Green Energy advanced 2.14 per cent.

In her Budget speech, she mentioned about rooftop solarisation to ensure free electricity of up to 300 units per month to one crore households, leading to household savings of Rs 15,000-18,000 annually. —*PTI*

RBI says 97.5% of ₹2K notes returned

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday said nearly 97.5 per cent of the Rs 2,000 bank notes have been returned to the banking system, and only about Rs 8,897 crore worth of the withdrawn notes are still with the public.

On 19 May, 2023 the RBI announced the withdrawal of Rs 2,000 denomination bank notes from circulation.

Thus, 97.5 per cent of the Rs 2,000 banknotes in circulation as on May 19, 2023, has since been returned, it added.

People can deposit and/or exchange Rs 2,000 bank notes at the 19 RBI offices across the country.

People can also send Rs 2,000 bank notes through India Post from any post office to any of the RBI Issue Offices for credit to their bank accounts in India.

The Rs 2,000 bank notes were introduced in November 2016, following the demonetisation of the then-prevailing Rs 1,000 and Rs 500 bank notes. —*PTI*

Continuation of export scheme gets approval

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Government on Thursday approved the continuation of an export incentive scheme - RoSCTL - for apparel, garments and made-ups up to March 31, 2026.

The Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies (RoSCTL) scheme is aimed at compensating for the state and central taxes and levies in addition to the rebate provided under duty drawback scheme on export of apparel/garments and made-ups.

"The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the continuation of scheme for RoSCTL for export of apparel/garments and made-ups up to March 31, 2026," an official statement said.

It said that the move will provide a stable policy regime which is essential for long-term trade planning, more so in the textiles sector where orders can be placed in advance for long-term delivery.

"The continuation of RoSCTL will ensure predictability and stability in policy regime, help remove the burden of taxes and levies and provide level-playing field on the principle that goods are exported and not domestic taxes," it said.

The scheme was launched in 2020. Earlier it was extended till March 2024.

The present extension up to March 2026 would help in enhancing export competitiveness of garment and made-up sectors.

The scheme for Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP) provides for refund of taxes, duties and levies that are incurred by exporters in the process of manufacturing and distribution of goods and are not being reimbursed under any other mechanism at the Centre, state or local level. —*PTI*

DEVELOPMENTAL PROJECT

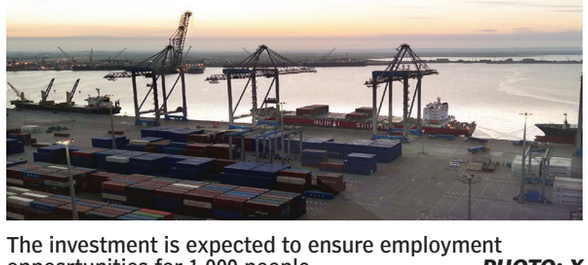
TN govt inks pact with German firm for setting up container terminals

CHENNAI, 1 FEB

Tamil Nadu government has secured a commitment from German container shipping company Hapag-Lloyd to invest Rs 2,500 crore for the development of container terminals and logistics parks in Thoothukudi and other parts of the state, the government said on Thursday.

An MoU was signed in the presence of Chief Minister MK Stalin, Hapag-Lloyd Managing Director JesperKanstrup, and other officials on 31 January in Spain, an official release here said.The investment is expected ensure employment opposrtunities for 1,000 people.Stalin is currently on a visit to Spain to attract investments to Tamil Nadu as part of his efforts to make the state a one trillion US dollar economy by 2030.

Hapag-Llyod's Director Albert Lorente and Tamil Nadu Industries Minister TR B Rajaa were among those present when the pact was inked.



The investment is expected to ensure employment opposrtunities for 1,000 people **PHOTO: X**

Observing that the efficient handling of freight transport is essential for widespread industrial development in Tamil Nadu, the government said it is undertaking various efforts to develop infrastructure such as setting up container ports, logistics parks, etc, at the four major ports in Tamil Nadu.The government has already announced a separate policy for this sector -- Logistics Policy 2023 -- the release said.During meetings with Hapag-Lloyd's top executives, the chief minister highlighted the opportunities in Tamil Nadu, seeking their investment. The company has offered to set up logistics facilities in Thoothukudi and various parts of Tamil Nadu with an investment of Rs. 2,500 crore.While emphasising that Tamil Nadu has the highest road density in India and boasts of high quality road infrastructure, Stalin said there is still a need to further improve the infrastructure to promote industrial development. —*PTI*

- Stalin is currently on a visit to Spain to attract investments to Tamil Nadu as part of his efforts to make the state a one trillion US dollar economy by 2030

PHOTO: PTI

Hamilton may move from Mercedes to Ferrari in 2025

PARIS, 1 FEB

Seven-time Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton has been linked with a shock move from Mercedes to Ferrari next year, according to reports on Thursday. Sky Sports News said Hamilton would leave Mercedes after the 2024 season and replace Carlos Sainz Jr. at Ferrari. It didn't cite any sources. The Daily Mail also said the deal would go through while motorsport.com said it wasn't a done deal yet but negotiations were at an advanced stage and could be concluded this week. When contacted by The Associated Press, Mercedes and Ferrari declined to comment on if Hamilton will join Ferrari.The move would surprise many F1 observers because the 39-year-old British driver signed a new two-year deal last summer until 2025, although it remains unclear whether the deal contained an escape clause. —AP

Sri Lanka to host ICC AGM in July

COLOMBO, 1 FEB

Sri Lanka will host the annual general meeting of the International Cricket Conference in July sports minister Harin Fernando said on Thursday. The announcement comes days after the world governing body lifted the suspension on Sri Lanka Cricket with immediate effect.The suspension cost Sri Lanka the opportunity to host the Under-19 World Cup which is currently underway in South Africa. Sri Lanka gets to host the ICC AGM from July 19-22 in Colombo. This will be a great boost for Sri Lanka with regards to cricket and tourism Fernando who is also the minister of tourism said in a statement.—AP

PHOTO: AP

Vitor Roque fires Barcelona to narrow win over Osasuna

DUBAI, 1 FEB

Barcelona ground out a 1-0 win over Osasuna to move third in La Liga on Wednesday as Xavi Hernandez started his long farewell as coach of the champions. The coach said he was stepping down at the end of the season after a heavy defeat last weekend left the Catalans 11 points behind league leaders Girona. Barcelona cut that down to eight with a largely drab win over their mid-table visitors, earned by young Brazilian striker Vitor Roque's first goal for the club. Osasuna had defender Unai Garcia sent off for two yellow cards but Barcelona could not put the game to bed.The Catalans also trail second-place Real Madrid by seven points despite playing one extra match.—AP

India face Nepal in final Super Six match

BLOEMFONTEIN, 1 FEB

India will be eager to make their semifinal entry a grand affair when they face a struggling Nepal in their final Group 1 Super Six match of the ICC Under-19 World Cup here on Friday.The top two sides from the two Super Six groups will progress to the semifinals of the marquee event.Pakistan (+1.06) is close on their heels with six points but India (+3.32) occupies the top slot because of a better net run rate.The tournament favorites under Uday Saharan are yet to taste defeat in the tournament and Nepal is unlikely to even stretch this powerful side.India's dominance is visible in the stats as well. —AP

Hurt India eye sweeping changes in approach in 2nd Test

England recalls James Anderson, Shoaib Bashir to debut

VISAKHAPATNAM, 1 FEB

India's Sarfaraz Khan during a practice session ahead of the second Test match between India and England, at Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium PHOTO: PTI

An under-pressure and under-resourced India will need to think out of the box to counter England's fearless bunch of Bazballers in the second Test beginning here on Friday.

India is seldom stretched at home but following a dramatic loss in Hyderabad they have plenty to ponder and the absence of injured Ravindra Jadeja and K L Rahul has made their task tougher. England batters led by OIndia won t have the luxury of fielding Jadeja in this game but Ashwin is four shy of the 500-wicket milestone in Tests and Axar will need to redraw their plans to come back hard at their uber-aggressive opponents who are sure to employ the sweeping tactics irrespective of the conditions.

"It's important that we respond and come up with some plans and some strategies and see how we can make him play those shots from probably even more difficult lengths and be even more disciplined and even more meticulous with our execution " India head coach Rahul Dravid had said after the 28-run defeat last week. Kuldeep Yadav is expected to play in Jadeja's absence and it remains to be seen if India goes in with only one pacer in Jasprit Bumrah and plays another spinner possibly off-spinning all-rounder Washington Sundar. Uncapped left-arm spinner Sourabh Kumar has also been added to the squad. Rohit perhaps was the only front-line batter who looked assured in the second innings while the young brigade especially Shubman Gill were guilty of playing the turning ball with hard hands.The defensive approach of Gill who had a breakout in 2023 in the shorter formats contributed to his downfall.

Shoaib Bashir, the 20-year-old Somerset off-spinner, will make his Test debut at Visakhapatnam on Friday after being named as Jack Leach's replacement in England's XI.

Bashir linked up with the squad mid-way through their 28-run victory in Hyderabad last week, after suffering complications with his India visa, but will slot straight into the team as a replacement for Jack Leach, whose impact in that match was hindered by bruising to the left knee, sustained while fielding on the first day.

Ben Stokes, England's captain, confirmed one other change on the eve of the Test, with **James Anderson** returning to the team as the lone seamer, in place of Mark Wood, who went wicketless in the same role at Hyderabad. —PTI

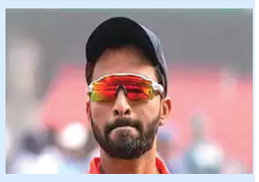
Shoaib Bashir PHOTO: PTI

James Anderson PHOTO: PTI

We have plans to counter England's aggression: Bharat

There is no panic in the injury-hit Indian camp declared wicketkeeper K S Bharat on Thursday asserting that the home side has made fresh plans to deal with England's attacking approach including employing the sweep shot as and when required in the second Test here. —PTI

I'm relentlessly trying to learn from Kohli's batting: Patidar



Expected to make his India debut against England in the second Test here prolific middle-order batter Rajat Patidar says he prides himself in being a good learner and has been trying to upgrade his skills by observing the iconic Virat Kohli. The injury-forced absence of KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja is set to finally open a window of opportunity for the 30-year-old who has scored tons of runs for Madhya Pradesh in the domestic circuit. I always observe his (Kohli) batting from the back of the nets especially his footwork and body movement while batting. I try to learn and add these things into my batting Patidar told BCCI. —PTI

India Men's Hockey Team skipper Harmanpreet Singh PHOTO: TWITTER

Harmanpreet to lead 24-member Indian hockey team

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

Ace drag-flicker Harmanpreet Singh will lead the Indian men's hockey team at the upcoming FIH Pro League matches in Bhubaneswar and Rourkela which are key to the side's preparation for this year's Paris Olympics.

Harmanpreet will have midfielder Hardik Singh as his deputy as Hockey India on Thursday named a 24-member squad for the double-leg fixtures. The Bhubaneswar leg will begin on 10 February and end on 16 February while the Rourkela leg will commence on 19 February and conclude on 25 February.

India will play against Ireland the Netherlands Spain and Australia twice each across both legs. The hosts will begin their campaign against Spain on 10 February.

The squad was on the expected lines with striker Boby Dhami and goalkeeper Pawan missing out from the 26-member Indian team that toured South Africa last month.

The Indian goalpost will be manned by veteran PR Sreejesh and Krishan Bahadur Pathak. The defensive line includes Harmanpreet Amit Rohidas Jarmanpreet Singh Varun Kumar Sumit Sanjay Jugraj Singh and Vishnukant Singh.

The midfield will be marshalled by Hardik Singh Manpreet Singh Vivek Sagar Prasad Shamsher Singh Rajkumar Pal Nilakanta Sharma and Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem. The forward line has plenty of experience along with youthful exuberance in Lalit Kumar Upadhyay Mandeep Singh Gurjant Singh Sukhjeet Singh Abhishek Akashdeep Singh and Araijeet Singh Hundal who recently made his debut for the senior side during the South Africa tour.

We've carefully selected a well-balanced squad blending seasoned expertise with the vigor of youth. Our goal is to forge a cohesive unit capable of competing at the highest level

Zero buzz in Islamabad for high-profile India-Pakistan Davis Cup contest

ISLAMABAD, 1 FEB

PHOTO: AP

Never has the Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) received requests for passes for a Davis Cup match from regions as far as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan but the city of Islamabad is not giving the remotest of hints of hosting a high-profile India-Pakistan contest.

Nothing not even a single poster in this beautiful city suggests that an Indian team has crossed the border for a Davis Cup match after 60 long years. The Islamabad Sports Complex the venue for the World Group I match is not giving any buzz either and the sprawling complex is out of bounds even for local media. The PTF has pinned hopes of revival of the sport in the country on this tie but the promotion of the match through branding advertisement marketing and interviews is woefully lacking. In a nutshell, the excitement and atmosphere which is usually attached to an India-Pakistan match is missing. To top it only 500 guests and fans will be inside the complex Saturday and Sunday the match days. The entry will be on invitation and PTF is picking only a niche tennis audience to attend. The stiffness of security is such that the Indian players will not be able to enjoy Pakistani hospitality. —AP

AIFF president Chaubey serves legal notice

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

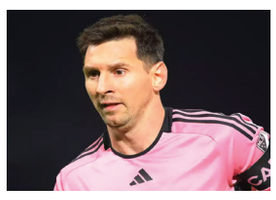
All India Football Federation President Kalyan Chaubey on Thursday served a legal notice to former Andhra Pradesh official Gopala krishna Kosaraju for making "false, malicious, anddefamatory allegations", after the latter accused him of using AIFF creditcards for buying personal things.

Chaubey, through his lawyer, gave Kosaraju seven days to tender apublic apology or face legal proceedings.

The AIFF president also said that he"reserves the right to seek compensation for damages incurred as a resultof the false and defamatory statements" against him. —PTI

Messi's Miami faces Mexican teams

QATAR, 1 FEB



Lionel Messi PHOTO: AP

Inter Miami and Lionel Messi will face Mexican teams Tigres and Puebla in this season's Leagues Cup, Major League Soccer announced on Wednesday.

Inter Miami is the defending champion in the tournament, which brings together all 47 top-flight teams from MLS and Mexico's Liga MX.

Messi led Miami to victory over Nashville in last year's tournament final, the club's first trophy since signing the Argentine World Cup winner.

The dates and venues of the games will be announced at a later date but the tournament kicks off on 26 July and the final will be held on 25 August.

The tournament will again be held only in the United States and Canada with Mexican clubs on the road throughout.

However, four of the Liga MX teams, including Tigres, will play "home" games at a "hub" in the United States to reduce travel.

The teams are split into 15 groups of three with MLS champions Columbus Crew and Liga MX winners Club America receiving byes into the next round. —AP

Pant reveals he feared leg amputation after life-threatening car crash

NEW DELHI, 1 FEB

India wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant PHOTO: PTI

India wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant has revealed that he feared the amputation of his right leg in the aftermath of the horrific car crash which he survived 13 months ago.

Pant was driving from Delhi to his hometown Roorkee to meet his family when his car crashed into the median divider on the road in December 2022. He had just returned from Bangladesh after playing a major role in India's win in the second Test in Mirpur.

"If there was any nerve damage, there was a possibility of amputation. That is when I felt scared," Pant said in Star Sports series 'Believe: To Death & Back' which documents his recovery.

"I had taken an SUV, but what I was seeing was a sedan," he quipped as he remembered his mangled vehicle.

Recounting the initial moments after the crash, the 26-year-old said he was in excruciating pain as his right knee had dislocated, turning 180 degrees to the right as he lay face down.

"There was someone around so I asked if he could help getting the leg back in the position. He helped the knee get back in place."

Two persons Rajat Kumar and Nishu Kumar were able to pull Pant out of his SUV before it went up in flames.

"It was the first time I had such a feeling in life. At the time of the accident, I was aware of the wounds, but I was lucky as it could have been even more serious," he recollected.

Pant underwent initial treatment at a hospital in Dehradun and was later airlifted to Mumbai where he was under the care of a specialist consultant brought in by the BCCI.

After undergoing surgeries to reconstruct all three ligaments in his right knee, Pant did his rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru. The big-hitter said the process is boring at best and frustrating at worst.

"I am focusing on recovery cut off from the world. It helps me recover fast, especially when the injury is so serious. For recovery, you have to do the same thing every day. It's boring, it's irritating, it's frustrating, but you have to do it," he elaborated.

The swashbuckling batter, who was instrumental in India's monumental win in the Brisbane Test in 2021 that sealed a famous series win in Australia, said the doctor gave him 16 to 18 months of recovery time.

"Till the time I start playing cricket, I don't want to plan much for the future. I asked the doctor how long will it take for me to recover. I told him that everybody is speaking different things, but you will give me the most clarity about it.

"He (Doctor) said it would take 16 to 18 months. I told the doctor from whatever timeline you give me, I will reduce six months from it," said Pant who is likely to play in the IPL for Delhi Capitals this season from March. —PTI

Junya Ito PHOTO: AP

Junya Ito investigated after sexual assault

TOKYO, 1 FEB

Japanese police said Thursday that they have launched an investigation into international footballer Junya Ito after local media reports said two women had accused him of sexual assault, a claim he denies. "We received a criminal complaint against him and have started an investigation," a police spokesman in Osaka working in the department covering crimes including sexual assaults told AFP. He declined to give further details including what the complaint was about. Ito is currently with the Japan team at the Asian Cup in Qatar.

The incident involving the two women is alleged to have taken place at a hotel in Osaka in June last year after a friendly between Japan and Peru, media reports said.

The midfielder has denied the allegations, Kyodo news agency reported, quoting his lawyer as saying the claims were "totally unfounded".

The 30-year-old was named in the matchday squad but was an unused substitute as Japan won 3-1 to reach the quarter-finals. —AP

HAALAND RETURNS

Liverpool sinks Chelsea to bolster title charge

ISLAMABAD, 31 JAN

- Erling Haaland made his Manchester City comeback as the champions beat Burnley 3-1 on Wednesday.

Premier League leaders Liverpool stepped up their title bid with a 4-1 rout of Chelsea, while Erling Haaland made his Manchester City comeback as the champions beat Burnley 3-1 on Wednesday. Jurgen Klopp's shock revelation that he will step down as Liverpool boss at the end of the season has done nothing to stop the momentum of a team challenging for silverware in four competitions. The Reds crushed Norwich 5-2 in the FA Cup fourth round on Sunday and were equally ruthless when Chelsea visited Anfield for the second game of Klopp's long goodbye.

First-half goals from Diogo Jota and Conor Bradley put Liverpool in control.

Dominik Szoboszlai scored Liverpool's third and, although Christopher Nkunku replied for overwhelmed Chelsea, Luis Diaz capped the hosts' dominant display.

Liverpool sit five points clear of second-placed City, who have a game in hand as they try to spoil Klopp's bid to bow out with the second Premier League title of his nine-year reign.

Liverpool celebrate their victory over Chelsea PHOTO: AFP

Unbeaten in their last 11 games in all competitions, Liverpool head to third-placed Arsenal on Sunday for another test of their title credentials.

"You have to play outstandingly well to keep Chelsea calm. But the way we started the game was really strong," Klopp said.

"We put them under pressure. Counter pressing was top, putting them in areas where they didn't want to be. It was a great night."

Klopp's men will meet Chelsea again in the League Cup final at Wembley on February 25, with the Reds also still competing in the FA Cup and Europa League.

Chelsea will have to improve significantly to win the rematch after a limp display that underlined why they are languishing in 10th place.

Haaland had been sidelined for nearly two months by a foot injury, but City barely missed the presence of the Norwegian as they won nine and drew one of the 10 games when he was absent.

Julian Alvarez again stepped up in Haaland's absence as the Argentine struck twice on his 24th birthday to effectively end the game at the Etihad as a contest inside 22 minutes. —AP